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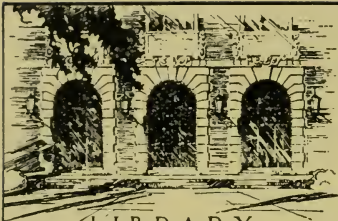
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A
POINT OF CONSCIENCE

BY
MRS. HUNGERFORD


AUTHOR OF

'MOLLY BAWN,' 'THE PROFESSOR'S EXPERIMENT,' 'LADY VERNER'S FLIGHT,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

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A POINT OF CONSCIENCE

CHAPTER XX.

‘A bitter and perplexed “What shall I do?”’

THE day is waning, and already the stall-holders are able to say to themselves that undoubtedly the bazaar has been a success. And, indeed, it would have ended without a hitch anywhere, but for Carry—poor Carry, who, as a rule, only tumbles into one catastrophe to find another.

She is wandering aimlessly round now, seeking whom she may devour, with regard to the last ticket in Mrs. Ronaldson’s raffle-book. Nearly everyone has given the orthodox shilling, and it is hard to ask twice; but something must be done.

It is five minutes to five exactly, and at five the tickets are to be drawn. Good gracious, she must hurry up! But who *is* there?

All at once her eyes light on a small, very kindly-visaged elderly lady sitting on a bench talking to another lady of her own age. Who is she? Carry racks her brain to try and remember if she has ever known—ever even heard of—her before, but nothing comes of the effort. Well, any way, she is a stranger, and can't have taken a ticket, and so she'll try her. She can't say more than 'No,' that's one comfort—and she may say 'Yes.'

With a rather nervous, if wide and lovely, smile on her frank young face, Carry charges up to this kindly-looking matron.

'Will you give me a shilling for this raffle?' asks she in a low tone.

She has been told to speak low, in case any of the new Bishop's people should be near.

The kindly-looking matron looks up at

her, and, seeing her, pauses. Whatever she had been *going* to say, this is now, at all events, what she does say :

‘I thought raffles were not allowed.’

‘This is only a little one,’ says Carry, with a nervous laugh, ‘though the Benares brass tray is quite big and very handsome.’

The strange lady’s smile broadens.

‘You know the Bishop has forbidden raffles.’

‘Yes—so awfully silly of him!’ says Carry confidentially.

She might have said more, but that a little sound emanating from the other strange lady sitting beside the one she is coercing into taking a ticket stops her.

She looks quickly at her; but there is little to see—her face is hidden in her handkerchief. Is she ill?

Carry is reassured by her companion’s indifference. If she were suffering, surely this nice-looking woman, with her kind eyes and smile, would hurry to her

assistance ! She goes back to her business.

‘ You will take a ticket ? ’ says she. ‘ It is the very last, and last tickets are lucky. I’ve just won something myself on a last ticket.’

‘ Something delightful, I hope,’ says the stranger.

‘ Yes, something I wanted ever so much,’ says Carry, beaming afresh as she remembers all that the roll of tweed is going to be to her.

‘ You are sure last tickets are fortunate ? ’

The stranger seems to pause, as if undecided, yet drawn by Carry’s statement.

‘ Quite—quite sure ! You will give me a shilling ? ’

‘ But what will the Bishop say ? ’

‘ Oh,’ says Carry, bending over her, and speaking in a low, mysterious tone, ‘ don’t be frightened about that. *He’ll never find you out.*’

At this the stranger’s face melts into a smile that Carry cannot help thinking must soon widen itself into hearty laughter ;

and as for her companion—‘Hysterical, poor thing!’ thinks Carry.

‘Not to be found out is evidently the principal thing,’ says the stranger. ‘Well, here’s the shilling. I suppose I may depend upon you that the Bishop won’t hear of it?’

‘You may indeed. At all events, it won’t be from me,’ says Carry gratefully. She tears off the slip, and gives it to the stranger. Mrs. Ronaldson, wise woman! has had her books made out as numbers instead of names. ‘You are a hundred and fifty,’ says she.

‘That’s very unkind,’ says the strange lady, glancing up at her quizzically. ‘At all events, before you go, I hope you will say I don’t *look* it.’

‘Oh,’ says Carry, breaking into a merry laugh, ‘you don’t, *at all!* You look as young as anything.’

‘I must look like you,’ says the stranger, laughing. And then, gently: ‘May I ask your name?’

‘You may indeed. I’m Carry Desmond,

and I live at Tudor Hall; and if ever you want to come and see our part of the world, I'm sure auntie and I will be very glad to see you, and we hope you will come and lunch with us.'

'Thank you,' says the strange lady very kindly and gently; 'I think I should like very much to come and lunch with you.'

Carry gives her a little gracious parting bow, and, crossing the room, goes straight to Mrs. Ronaldson.

'It's all right; I've got the last ticket filled—one hundred and fifty.'

'Oh, you good girl!—when shillings were lying so low, too! Who gave it?'

'That nice-looking elderly woman over there on the far bench—no, not there—the other side.'

Mrs. Ronaldson turns upon her a stricken face.

'Not that woman, Carry?'

'Certainly that woman,' says Carry, a little angrily. 'And why not, may I ask? Who is she?'

'Only'—into Mrs. Ronaldson's voice a

tragic note has come—‘only the Bishop’s wife !’

‘Oh, oh !’ says Carry. Words seem beyond her. ‘And I told her the Bishop would never *know*, if she took a ticket. . . . And I said the Bishop was *silly* ! Oh, Mrs. Ronaldson, what is to become of me ?’

But Mrs. Ronaldson is now in such convulsions of laughter that advice from her is hard to get.

‘Go to him,’ gasps she at last, ‘and get absolution. Throw yourself on his mercy. He is to give an informal address before he leaves to-night, I’m told, so you can easily get hold of him. It will be a hair skirt, to a moral, and no more bonbons till Candlemas. A light sentence. I only trust I am not buoying you up with false hopes, Carry ; he may order the white sheet and the candles, but——’

‘Oh, bother !’ says Carry indignantly, swinging herself out of her stall and away from her.

But even as she goes she finds that

all present—that is, most of the younger people — are congregating together — moving by twos and threes to the end of the big room, where a tall, stout, benign-looking man is standing, conversing with Anthony Verschoyle and others. That must be the Bishop. Is he going to give that address now? Has Mrs. —— (she really has forgotten the new Bishop's name, so little interest has she taken in him)—has his wife told the Bishop of her misdemeanour? Any way, she is just as bad as Carry herself. *She gave* the shilling to the immoral raffle. But what's the good of that? Even if that fact were to exonerate her — Carry — from blame, she would certainly not betray poor Mrs. ——Mrs. 'Bishop.'

At this moment she finds Richie at her elbow, and, clutching him eagerly, pours into his sympathetic ears all her story.

'Wasn't it unfortunate?' says she at last.

But even Richie fails her. He has

taken the tragedy as a big joke, and is shaking with laughter.

‘Really, Richie, I think you, at all events, might——’

‘Caroline, be silent,’ says Mr. Browne, who has just joined them. ‘The Bishop is on the war-path !’

And, indeed, the Bishop has just begun his impromptu address—an address, as he is bound to see, to be given to the younger members of his diocese only. The elder ones, too tired out from their exertions during the day, or too wary, have cautiously abstained from putting in an appearance, and the Bishop, who is as understanding and kind a man as possible, and one to make allowances, decides on addressing the word or two in season he has to say to the young specially.

Of course he begins on charity. The bazaar means charity. But from that he drops into more personal ways.

‘The mind is like the ground,’ says the good Bishop, in his most solemn tones. ‘It should be cultivated, watered, enriched

from year to year.' ('Ask him what's the best thing for *your* mind?' whispers Mr. Browne to Carry strenuously.)

'Good seed should be sown in it,' goes on the Bishop earnestly in his slow, rather fat voice. ('Oh, hang it! we'll have to get Carter's list if this goes on,' says Dicky *sotto voce*.) 'Not cheap or spurious stuff; and all weeds should be eradicated, more especially, and above all, that deadliest of weeds—deceit!'

Carry grows very pale.

'Oh, Dicky, do you think he means me?' asks she, trembling.

That ticket sold to the Bishop's wife is weighing more heavily than ever on her.

'Who can say?' returns Mr. Browne lugubriously. 'I did think—didn't you?—that he was looking very much in this direction.'

'I think I'll leave,' says Carry feebly.

She half rises.

'If you do, you give yourself away at once, and are a marked sinner for life,'

says Mr. Browne, with conviction, at which she sits down again promptly.

Meanwhile the Bishop's slow, deliberate voice has been going on. He has left the nervous ground of deceit now, and is leading up to the consequences that surround it, and, with a modesty most becoming, has descended from his personal eloquence to that of Solomon.

‘Withhold not correction from the child.’

Here, unfortunately, his eye happens by chance to fall on Jinnie—who is gazing at him with a stony glare expressive of deep disgust—so that she catches it full. Jinnie is raging ! She had firmly believed, when coming up here to the end of the hall, that she was going to see a conjurer of some sort. There were conjurers at the last bazaar—and now, what sort of a thing is this for a bazaar ? Why, it is just like church !

‘Withhold not correction from the child,’ repeats the Bishop, now held by Jinnie’s glittering eye, ‘for if thou beatest

him with a rod '—as though the rod had touched her, Jinnie springs to her feet—
'he shall not die!'

The Bishop pauses, and then an awful thing happens.

'You're a beast! You're a beast!' screams Jinnie, waving her hands frantically. 'No, I *won't* be quiet!' presumably to someone in the background—to Carry, really—who is trying to draw her down and into subjection. 'He *is* a beast, and it's unfair, it *is*. I *won't* be beaten with rods. You're a nasty, nasty man'—this to the poor Bishop—'and I'll tell mammy about you, and she——'

But here she is forcibly removed by Mr. Browne, Carry, and Amyot, to the open air, where she still stands sobbing and shrieking, and shaking her little hands.

The address is hopelessly at an end.

'Dear, dear, dear!' says the poor Bishop, who is really the very kindest man.

And that is all; he retires into the background.

Mr. Browne, who is consumed by a mirth but very ill repressed, is striving to soothe the incensed Jinnie.

‘I quite agree with you, my dear Jinnie! It was outrageous — a perfect breach of the peace! You will be fully justified in calling him out, my poor child; and I’d strongly advise your doing it. Such open attacks are not to be countenanced. Call him out, Jinnie, and I’ll back you up. I’ll be your second.’

‘Horrid, unkind old thing!’ sobs the indignant Jinnie. ‘Rods he said! Rods indeed!’

‘Yes, it was rods. You heard it, Amyot, didn’t you? And you, Carry? Rods certainly was the word.’ Mr. Browne is growing magisterial in his wrath. ‘This cannot be lightly passed over. What shall we do with him, my poor injured innocent?’

‘Sell him,’ says Jinnie eagerly, who has been deeply impressed by the doings of the last two days. She has seen that all the things that were sold in her mother’s

stall were taken away and never appeared again. And there were things called auctions, where men stood up in big chairs, like the slaves in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and people gave money, and—— She is a little confused. But perhaps they were sold, too. Oh, if only that nasty old fat man could be sold to someone who would take him away, like mammy's pretty things, and never bring him back again.

'A most excellent suggestion!' says Mr. Browne. 'I shall see that it is done instantly. Ah, Miss Royce, that you?' seeing Maden coming hurriedly up. 'Poor dear Jinnie has been most unjustly assailed, and indeed threatened. To avoid an action for assault and battery, I would suggest to you that home will be now the best place for her.'

'Lady Maria and Mrs. Verschoyle are very angry. You are to come home at once, Jinnie,' says Miss Royce, hardly deigning to notice any of the other three present. Her small, vivid face is alight, her eyes flashing. She had been ordered

off peremptorily by Lady Maria to see to her grand-daughter, the report of Jinnie's outbreak having spread, and Miss Royce was not pleased at her errand or the manner of its conveyance.

She marches off Jinnie, who is always cowed by her, in a stony silence.

Amyot laughs.

'I heard they had at first thought of having fireworks for this bazaar,' says he, 'as a sort of wind-up to it. Quite providential they didn't. Jinnie has provided them gratis.'

Mr. Browne is looking after Miss Royce.

'Quite superfluous, as you say,' returns he a little absently. 'In my opinion, we have been having them all along!'

Carry, meantime, has slipped back to the bazaar, to find that the Bishop's wife has just won the Benares brass tray.

'Well, any way, she can't say much to me *now*,' thinks Carry, with deep self-gratulation.

CHAPTER XXI.

‘Think naught a trifle, though it small appear.’

VERSCHOYLE had refused to hear a word about his guests leaving him the day after the bazaar, though Lady Maria had arranged for her return to the Dower-house on that day. No, she would be tired, Anthony had declared, and, besides, he was bent on giving a little dance—the simplest, most informal affair—to the stall-holders and their pretty assistants: just a few neighbours, nothing more, and without the light of his mother’s countenance how could he hope to make it a success?

So he coaxed her, and Lady Maria, who, to confess a truth, still takes much joy in looking at a dance, gives in gracefully, and

consents to patronize what she calls ‘Anthony’s little impromptu.’

‘That’s so good of you,’ says Anthony, kissing her affectionately.

‘Oh, my dear,’ says Lady Maria, ‘what is there I wouldn’t do for you? You are all I have now, Anthony; you know that.’

The old, soft eyes fill with tears. Her thoughts have gone back to Jinnie’s father, to the elder born, the first baby that had lain upon her breast! She looks at Anthony. How good he is, and what an honest soul is his! A tall man, too, and upright in stature as in mind. Not so fair to look upon, perhaps, as the heart’s idol she has lost—but still, a man every inch of him. She sighs again, but the tears have died out of her eyes. Truly she has still something left.

‘Yes, you are all that is left to me, my darling,’ says she. ‘But you are a great gift, Anthony—I feel that.’

‘Now,’ she might have added. Anthony indeed had played very considerably

‘second fiddle’ whilst his brother was alive, and it is only of late years that his mother, unconsciously, has become conscious of his sweet and strong nature.

‘You mustn’t flatter me out of all common-sense,’ says he, laughing and kissing her again. ‘I’m very ordinary clay, I assure you. But I’m ever so glad you will stay on until to-morrow. By the way, couldn’t you let Miss Royce come down to-night, after Jinnie is in bed? Do! It seems awfully beastly, letting the poor girl stay up there all alone, whilst the rest of us are dancing.’

Lady Maria, who is in a softer mood than she has been for years, hesitates.

‘She plays very well,’ says she. ‘Of course . . . this little dance of yours . . . got up so instantaneously, has left you without time to provide musicians.’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, then, Miss Royce will probably be a help to you. Yes, she can play! I’ll let her know that we would be glad if she would——’

‘Oh, not like that, you know,’ says Anthony hastily. ‘Tell her we’ll all be delighted to see her, and that we hope she’ll come down, and that if it wouldn’t trouble her to play a waltz or two——’

‘A waltz or *two*! My dear boy, she will of course be only too glad to help you to make your dance a success. She is a most reasonable creature, though Jane, I fear, has taken a dislike to her—why, I can’t imagine.’

‘Pulled Jinnie’s ears, I suppose,’ says Anthony lightly. ‘Well, that’s all right; you’ll get her to come down, and——’

He doesn’t get beyond the ‘and,’ which perhaps is wise. If spoken, the continuance of his sentence would mean that Miss Royce, as far as in his power lies, should have a good time. He has always felt a little uncomfortable about the fact that here, in his own house, that ‘poor little girl upstairs’ has not been made as happy as she might be. That monkey Jinnie (he is very fond, however, of the ‘monkey’)

has held her in thrall all through, or so he has been told.

* * * * *

The dancing-room is now in full blaze, all the wax candles in their beautiful, innumerable sconces being lit all round the walls. There had been little time for anything, but Cecil and Carry, assisted by the others, had put flowers here and there, and the result is very happy.

Even Mrs. Berkeley, who has arrived with her hair and her cheeks even redder than usual, has been heard to say that it was quite wonderful how much has been done, at a moment's notice as it were.

‘Only hope the supper hasn’t been lost sight of in the general rush for outward beauty,’ she says to the person nearest her, with a sniff.

The rooms were somewhat empty when she arrived. She always comes early and goes late, with a steady determination to see the beginning and the end of everything—‘to get her penn’orth,’ as Mr. Browne very vulgarly expresses it. And

now the lovely old ballroom is alive with pretty faces, and, alas ! with many ugly ones.

Miss Langley-Binks has come like the Assyrian cohorts of old. She is positively 'gleaming with purple and gold,' an awful combination that, nevertheless, suits her (one feels this is difficult of belief), and has been actually cordial—more, even dreadfully affectionate to Amyot, who had had the ill luck to meet her on her entrance.

Carry, during a pause, notices this, and is very glad for Richie's sake. Poor, dear old Richie ! To be a cowboy would be awful !

Aurora is, indeed, particularly nice to Amyot—afraid, perhaps, of that little outburst of temper of hers yesterday, and of losing her own chance down here of gaining a place in that haven called 'good society,' where she would be. And Richie is very nice to her, too. Whether this change of front on his part arises from a feeling of remorse at having made her in some vague way unhappy during that last hour at the

bazaar, or a growing determination to go in and win, not her fortune, indeed (he cares little for that or her), but the restoration of the old place—the home that years have made so dear to him—who can say ?

‘ He is thinking about it really now,’ says Carry to herself. ‘ And he is right—quite right. Ah ! her mother has joined them. Is he going to be nice to her too ? Well, to be nice to her is very wise ! I think ’—with a melancholy reluctance—‘ that I had better begin to be nice to Mr. Popkin !’

And, indeed, towards the end of the evening, she is so far ‘ nice ’ to him that, when he proposes to her as usual, she says the usual ‘ No ’ so kindly, so gently, so altogether regretfully, that Popkin becomes jubilant, and filled with the blest, if somewhat previous, assurance that she has said ‘ Yes ’ *almost*—at last ! whilst Carry can think of nothing but that Richie, who must have seen this silly curate with her, has failed to come to her support.

‘Mrs. Binks har to-night?’ asks Mrs. Berkeley, in her queer intonation. She makes a point of never calling her enemy by the first name.

‘Tremendously “har,”’ says Mr. Browne, with an air so innocent of offence that no one could have found fault with it. ‘Over “thar,” on the lounge, making Amyot happy.’

‘Good heavens! is that really poor Mrs. Binks? What a get-up! Thought she was coming to a fancy-dress ball, evidently. What’s she meant for? Eh? What’s she posing as?’

‘Amyot’s mother-in-law,’ says Fenton, laughing.

Mrs. Berkeley shrugs her lean shoulders.

‘He’s paying a heavy price,’ says she. ‘But hardly so heavy as the price she must have paid any decent dressmaker to consent to make that gown she is wearing. Where’—lifting her eyeglass—‘where on earth did she get it?’

‘Didn’t you hear?’ says Dicky Browne, in a profound whisper.

‘No!’—eagerly. ‘Who told you? What is it? Where, then?’

‘In a raffle yesterday. But I think, perhaps, we ought not to speak of it. She may like to tell us herself later on. I have always shrunk from spoiling other people’s delightful little surprises.’

‘I don’t know about the delightful,’ says Mrs. Berkeley, who is somewhat nettled at the take-in; ‘but as to the surprise, it’s all there.’

And, indeed, Mrs. Langley-Binks’ gown is a thing of terror, and a pain for ever. She had bought it six months ago, poor woman!—it is impossible not to be sorry for her—and has kept it religiously out of sight of all women until a sufficiently important occasion should arise to allow of her wearing it. To-night she deems sufficiently important, and has put it on at last, glad in the belief that she will astonish all beholders.

And, indeed, she has! Her belief is most liberally justified.

‘As for your absurd joke about her

getting it in a raffle, I shouldn't be surprised at anything she would do,' says Mrs. Berkeley with emphasis. 'For the past two days—she started at dawn the first day, and ended at midnight yesterday sharp—she's been buying up all poor Mrs. Daintree's bric-à-brac for almost nothing. You know that silly little idiot of a woman, don't you?—Mrs. Daintree, the wife of the cotton-mill man? Well, it appears she bought the most expensive bits of china for her stall, to outdo, I suppose, the people who——' She pauses.

'Yes, we know—who are not in her set,' says Fenton quizzically.

'Well, those china jars and pots and things could not possibly be sold in a place like this under a heavy loss, any way,' goes on Mrs. Berkeley. 'The Daintree woman, it appears, bought them at some Bond Street place, instead of sending to good old Whiteley's, where she might have had very nice little bits, to look at, at three-pence three-farthings each. What does one do with the superfluous farthings, I

wonder, that one gets in change? If collected, there must be a fortune in them.'

'I shall go in for them at once,' says Fenton. 'I have just heard of quite a sane old gentleman who died leaving ten pounds in threepenny bits, tied up in the leg of his old trousers.'

'And Mrs. Daintree to start on such a frolic as that!' says Mrs. Berkeley, twisting her glass again in her eye. 'Last person in the world to sell anything to advantage. She evidently thought that to be able to sell a few cups and saucers at tenpence each, that cost a guinea, would bring her into society. Proves nothing to me beyond the fact that she's dangerous, poor creature, and ought not to be at large. However, that's beside the mark. What I wished to say is, that Mrs. Binks romped in at the end, after coquetting about it all along, and bought everything straight away for a mere song.'

'Just like her, mean old thing!' says Carry, with all her extraordinary vigour. 'She tried to buy some of that beautiful

old lace in Mrs. Ronaldson's stall, but Mrs. Ronaldson wouldn't let her.'

'Do you know, I think I rather like Mrs. Ronaldson,' says Mrs. Berkeley languidly.

This causes an instantaneous stir amongst her audience. Good heavens! what next? That Mrs. Berkeley should like *anyone*!

It occurs to Mr. Browne that *he* would like to sound the 'next.' Things are always occurring to Dicky.

'She strikes me,' says he, 'as being delightful.'

'Delightful?' Mrs. Berkeley turns an inquiring eye on him.

'Altogether so!'

'A trifle fast!' suggests Mrs. Berkeley.

'That's what makes her altogether so.'

'Well, fast if you like, but not furious,' says Mrs. Berkeley, falling back and trifling with her fan, which is very old, and has signs of repairs about the ivory sticks. 'However, we were discussing Mrs. Binks, weren't we?—not Mrs. Ronaldson. By-the-by, what a guy her daughter made of

herself at the bazaar! Turkish maiden was she, or a Circassian? Fancy a Circassian with a figure like that! Lilian Daintree posed as Scotland, and looked as little ridiculous as she could help, poor girl! covered with those hideous thistles; but Miss Binks—she should have called herself India.'

'India?' asks Carry, puzzled.

'She'd make a capital elephant,' says Mrs. Berkeley, with the usual little lift of her shoulders.

'I think her dress became her,' says Carry valiantly.

'Yes?' Mrs. Berkeley looks bored. 'Not a costume for a *bazaar*, in the wilds down here, at all events!'

'Why not?' says Mr. Browne, who sees a little breaking of the peace is imminent, and determines to avert it if possible—he is fond of Carry. 'It was distinctly *bizarre*, any way.'

At this feeble joke some of them are good enough to laugh with a view to help him in his little effort, and the subject of

Miss Langley - Binks' gown fades into oblivion.

And beside, something else is happening just now. Miss Royce has entered the room, a roll of music clenched in her right hand. Without a glance to right or left, and with her small dark head thrown a little back—defiantly, thinks Fenton, whose eager gaze is watching her every movement—she walks straight to the piano. Dancing is about to begin.

CHAPTER XXII.

‘Beholding heaven, and feeling hell.’

MISS ROYCE had been sent a kindly, delicately-worded little note from Lady Maria, to the effect that, if not tired, she would be glad if she would come downstairs at nine to-night, and play some of her charming waltzes for the young people whom Mr. Verschoyle had asked to a little impromptu dance.

Miss Royce had paled during the reading of this note, and had at once decided on refusing, even though the refusal might cost her her situation. She was Jinnie’s governess, not a hired musician for Mr. Verschoyle’s entertainments.

Then, all at once, a longing to go down and see the gay scene below proves too

much for her. Why not go and see the lights, the dresses? Better, a thousand times, the humiliation of appearing as the poor governess who is called in to help their pleasure, than to sit up here all night in this dark, lonely chamber, listening to the sounds of music and laughter coming up to her from the dancing-room and the hall.

And besides—a thrill runs through her—she might venture to put on the pretty little amber-coloured Indian silk she had bought when coming to the Dower-house, under the mistaken impression that sometimes she might be asked to dine with ‘the family.’

‘The family’ had not wanted her presence, however, at dinner, privately amongst themselves, or when having guests, and the charming little gown had lain hidden at the bottom of her trunk ever since her arrival at the Dower-house. She had never once worn it.

Oh, to wear it to-night! To come down looking really well dressed, looking

like all the rest of them, for once ! She lets her face fall into her hands, as if to hide the sudden rising colour that is dyeing it a glad crimson. Oh, to let him see her as he has never seen her yet, in a dainty evening gown, and with her neck and arms—— They *are* pretty—yes, they *are*—and like snow !

She sits down and scribbles an answer to Lady Maria—a very discreet one, in spite of the fact that her heart is thumping against her side, partly with anger, partly with excitement. ‘She’—so the letter runs—‘is always pleased to oblige Lady Maria in any way. She will be in the dancing-room at nine, as Lady Maria wishes.’

‘Excellent creature !’ says Lady Maria, having finished the note. ‘Jane is quite wrong about her. I shall make her a substantial present at Christmas. Or has she a birthday ? Do people in her position have birthdays ? I shall make inquiries. Of course, if she hasn’t, Christmas will do.’

Perhaps Lady Maria had not been prepared for the yellow silk. At all events, as Miss Royce now sweeps up the room, with a cold disdain of all things carved upon her strange face, Lady Maria is conscious of a sense of incongruity between the gown and Jinnie's governess. She is, however, as has been said, a prey to beauty, and presently her touch of amazed annoyance fades into one of mere surprise, and after that she leans back amongst her cushions again, and lets a little wave of admiration break pleasantly over her.

'Charming! A little symphony in black and yellow!' says she, turning to Mrs. Verschoyle, who is near her. 'A perfect vision—a dream, my dear Jane! There are immense possibilities in that young girl, I assure you.'

'I have never denied that,' says Mrs. Verschoyle slowly, and almost sadly. She, too, is watching the pride, the hatred, on the dark face as Maden comes up the room.

'She holds her head to admiration,' goes

on the Dowager with enthusiasm. 'A girl like that, Jane, must be beneficial to our Jinnie.' She holds a part-proprietorship in the engaging Jinnie. 'She will teach her to regard beauty as one of the best things life can give her—to cultivate it wherever she goes. Real loveliness in art or nature is a joy. I, old as I am, have not been dead to the æsthetic instincts of the day. I should like Jinnie to follow its lines—in moderation, of course.'

'Ah! is there any moderation?' says Mrs. Verschoyle. 'Æstheticism goes far, it seems to me.'

'One must go far to gain any end.'

'Some of its apostles are hardly to be followed, at all events,' says Mrs. Verschoyle, in a cooler tone than she usually uses towards her mother-in-law. 'You remember that Mr. Vigors we met in town last year? You admired him! He was intensely modern; but I have heard lately that he is not even known now by respectable people. Some story——'

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Miss Royce is at the piano. And now the room is filled with the brilliant opening bars of the latest waltz. Maden's nature—fiery and deeply artistic, deeply sensitive—is naturally musical. Her touch rings clear and true, and all the passion that the composer has thrown into the music, and much, *much* more that he has never dreamt of, is now throbbing beneath her fingers. Never did dancers dance to better strains. The very spirit of the waltz seems to have entered into them. Anthony, with his arm round Cecil's waist, feels all the love and longing for her, that has been his for many months, now mount to a passion hardly to be restrained.

Pausing for a moment next the piano, he bends over the little flying fingers.

‘A modern Pied Piper, if in woman's robes. Who could resist your music?’

Miss Royce gives him the faintest smile in return, or is it a near approach to a sneer?

And now he and Cecil are gone again, and Maden's playing grows even more

brilliant, more seductive, though the soul within her feels numbed—deadened. Round her float the gay forms. The piano is placed in a recess, and from everywhere the sounds of happy mirth reach her, *crying* to her above the music that she is giving to these revellers—*calling* to her to come out and away, and join in the happy moment.

But who is she that she should dare to answer and accept that call?

Steadily go the small fingers—more and more passionate rings the music.

‘How beautifully she plays!’ says a pretty, light-hearted girl to her partner. ‘She seems to enjoy her own playing. I suppose she will turn out a genius some day.’

But it can hardly be said that Miss Royce is enjoying herself. She sits there, apparently quite calm, her eyes fixed upon the key-board. Yet

‘She

Whom the gods love, Tranquillity,’

has passed out of her life for ever.

She has not once lifted her eyes since first she sat down to play, and still, impossible as it sounds, she knows that now Cecil Fairfax is dancing with Fenton. A sullen despair fastens on her, whilst her cheeks know a brilliant colour for once, and her heart seems on fire.

Suddenly she is conscious that once again two people have come up, and are standing beside her. She has not seen who they are, yet a strange trembling troubles her, and for the first time a discordant note sounds from beneath her hand.

And now Cecil is bending over her—has caught the small, tired fingers in her own larger, if more exquisitely fashioned ones, and has, with a pretty glance of apology, mingled with a kindly authority, raised Maden's hands from the piano.

'No more—not another bar!' says Miss Fairfax, smiling down at her, her beautiful face tender in its solicitude.

'I am not tired,' says Maden coldly, ungraciously.

‘Oh, you must be. Don’t you think so, Sidney?’—to her companion. ‘And, besides, they have all stopped dancing for the moment, so now you can rest.’

‘For the moment!’ says Maden, with a bitter smile.

‘Longer than that, I hope.’

Miss Fairfax has released the girl’s hand, and is leisurely drawing off her long gloves.

‘Yes?’ Maden has not looked up. ‘You are sanguine. Who do you think is to play the rest?’

‘I shall,’ says Cecil gaily.

‘You!’

Miss Royce does look up now, to see the beautiful, trusting eyes smiling into hers, and to note the loveliness of the naked and rounded arms.

Cecil laughs.

‘Oh! I know what you mean. I shall prove but a very poor substitute. I hardly expect to be received with open arms after your charming playing. Still, perhaps I can fill a void for a little while. Now’—

with gentle suasion—‘*get* up, and let me run my hands over the keys before they begin again. I feel actually nervous.’

She almost makes Maden leave the music-stool, and, having displaced her, seats herself before the piano, and strikes a few opening bars.

‘You—you going to play, Cecil?’ says Fenton with surprise. He had, indeed, had no idea of her meaning when she led him towards the piano just now.

Cecil nods brightly.

‘But—I cannot allow it—it is impossible,’ stammers Maden, now very white. ‘Lady Maria——’

‘Will be very glad that you should have a rest,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle, who has just come up, and has not only heard the last words, but quite understands the entire situation—‘and you must make it a long one. When Miss Fairfax is tired, I shall take her place. Believe me, it gives me pleasure that you should enjoy yourself when it is possible.’

She has not forgotten that scene of a

night or two ago, and she speaks kindly, if without friendliness. Something in the girl—suppressed, difficult of getting at—has repulsed her. But her keen sense of justice, or conscience, or whatever it is, had been hurt by that midnight interview with her daughter's governess. If, as the girl had hinted, she had been neglectful of her duty towards her—had been passively unkind—she must look to it that she does not so fail in the future. 'Go,' says she with a smile. 'You need not be in the least unhappy about Miss Fairfax, or anything else.'

'Perhaps, then, Miss Royce,' says Sidney, 'you will give me this dance—if dancing can be called a rest.'

'A change is always rest,' says the girl quietly.

They move away together, as Cecil's fingers once more create a chord. It is a minor one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

‘ At sixes and sevens.’

‘ So glad the poor garl is getting breathing-time,’ says Mrs. Berkeley, who, having danced incessantly until this moment, has now given in to ‘ the extreme heat,’ as she calls it, but really to the imperative orders of advancing years. The Infantry boy has beaten a retreat again this evening, and so very little is left to the lean siren in the way of amusement save scandal and small-talk. To dance all night, even if partners were forthcoming, would make a most unforgivable morrow. ‘ Awful hard to be a governess ! Mere machine, don’t you know.’

‘ How very pretty she is !’ says somebody enthusiastically.

‘Pretty? Very pretty in her own line,’ says Mr. Popkin critically. ‘It’s not mine, however.’

He casts a languishing glance at Carry, who doesn’t see it. She is too deeply engaged watching Richie’s third effort to escape from Mrs. Langley-Binks. *Once* he had fought his way gallantly, casting the huge matron behind him, regardless of all consequences. The second time, when she sailed down upon him, he was near the conservatory door; then he had made an attempt to plunge through the glass beyond, and, failing, had, with all the courage of despair, told the advancing matron that he was dancing this with her daughter. Unhappily Aurora was sitting behind a big myrtle-bush at the moment, and had risen with alacrity.

‘Ours?’ she said. ‘Really? Do you know, I had actually forgotten it.’

Now is the third descent of Mrs. Langley-Binks, and it is with a face of scorn and a bitter eye that Richie, break-

ing loose from her coils, approaches Mrs. Berkeley's party.

'Nice colourin',' goes on Mr. Popkin, in his little squeak. 'Dancin' with Fenton now, I see.'

'Sometimes I think she is beautiful,' says Carry reluctantly. 'Only, if I could be beautiful, I shouldn't like to look *like* her, some way.'

'She's got the beauty of the devil,' says Mrs. Berkeley. 'Pretty, but troublesome, I'd label her.'

'Could a woman be pretty without being troublesome?' asks Anthony, laughing, who has just come up.

'Ask us another,' says Mr. Browne sadly.

'To leave vexed questions and come to a fact,' says Mrs. Berkeley, 'I think it would be impossible to deny that women can be troublesome *without* being pretty! Mrs. Binks, for example. Ah, here you are, Mr. Amyot!'—making room for him near her. She has a weakness for young men—'boys' as she always calls them,

with charming friendliness. 'We were just talking of Mrs. Binks.'

'Mrs. Langley-Binks?'—with question in his tired eyes.

'Mrs. *Binks*'—with decision. 'We were saying she could be troublesome.'

'Were you?' says Richie, letting his brow fall upon his hand.

A deep sigh escapes him. Evidently he is in the last stage of exhaustion. The Binks chase has been keen.

'She's a very stupid woman,' says Carry, most unexpectedly, and with even more than her usual awful directness.

Mr. Browne laughs.

'Well, she *does* give herself away a good deal,' says he.

At this the long-suffering Richie loses himself altogether, and bursts into the wrath that for hours has been consuming him.

'I wish to heaven she'd give herself away once and for all, and be done with it!' says he in a fearful growl.

Even Mrs. Berkeley, who seldom laughs,

now retires behind her fan, and chokes there quietly for a little while.

‘My dear Amyot, what gross ingratitude!’ says Dicky Browne. ‘I have always understood that Mrs. Langley-Binks has shown the most affectionate interest in you!’

Richie, who is in no mood for chaff, rises abruptly and goes over to Carry.

‘I say,’ exclaims he suddenly, ‘I’m dead sick of all this sort of thing! Let us go for a good five-mile walk to-morrow, Carry, up to the Glen and back again.’

‘I don’t know that I shall,’ says Carry.

Amyot stares at her. ‘Et tu, Brute?’ Is she, too, going to turn against him, to fall away from him—Carry, his own familiar friend?

‘Oh, you needn’t look like that! I don’t know why I should go anywhere with you. You saw me with Mr. Popkin a while ago, and left me stranded there—never once came to the rescue.’

‘He’s with you now, too, and you don’t seem to mind it.’

‘There’s safety in a multitude. But I was alone with him that time of which I speak. You *must* have seen him, Richie—we were sitting right under the big myrtle, and he was talking . . . and . . . and you saw how I hated it, and never came. That ’—with her honest, indignant eyes on his—‘is true now, Richie, isn’t it?’

‘Why should I help you to get rid of Popkin?’ demands he gloomily. ‘They all say that the best thing you can do is to marry him. Why should I, who am your friend, try to prevent you from doing the best thing for you?’

‘I don’t think, after all, I ever could,’ says Carry thoughtfully. ‘It’s his nose, I think. . . . And his voice, that’s horrid! They’re *both* horrid!’

‘Everything is horrid,’ says poor Richard, who is now at a very low ebb. ‘Even you! . . . So you won’t come for a walk to-morrow after you leave this?’

‘I don’t think I went as far as that,’ says Carry, relenting.

‘ You will come, then ?’—eagerly. ‘ You promise ?’

‘ All right,’ says Miss Desmond with her usual boyish, off-hand air and one of her happy smiles ; whereon Richie feels the tension round his heart somewhat relieved.

CHAPTER XXIV.

‘There’s neither honesty, manhood, nor good-fellowship in thee.’

OUT here in the starlight the night is sweeter than the day. The stars are standing in a clear sky, blue, luminous. Now and again a pale cloud floats across them, but only for a moment. Tranquillity marks the heavens to-night.

The corners lie rich in shadows. Over there, where the rhododendrons, now in their full glory, are sleeping upright—few flowers are so haughty as the rhododendron flowers—the darkness is complete. How silent the world has grown! How remote! No sound anywhere.

Maden, almost oppressed by the universal calm, leans forward on the garden-seat, as

if listening, longing for a break into this strange, beautiful—too beautiful silence.

‘What is it?’ asks Fenton in a low tone.

‘Oh, the terrible silence!’

The girl’s heart is throbbing.

But even as she speaks the silence is broken; from somewhere—is it to the right or the left?—two notes float upon the air.

It is a wandering cuckoo. Two notes are all she has, and they sound now deep and loud upon the midnight air; sound incessantly, until the ear grows mad with the repetition of it.

‘Are you a witch?’ says Fenton, catching her hand. ‘Did you invoke that bird? Sometimes I think you are. You have bewitched me, at all events.’

She pulls her hand out of his.

‘If I was only sure of that!’

‘I wronged you,’ says he lightly. ‘If you were a witch you would know the truth. Well, are you satisfied with your cuckoo? He has broken your silence,

at all events. As for me, I hate the bird. The terrible monotony of his cry gets on one's nerves. Poets sing of the cuckoo as though it were another word for spring, but for my part I think it annoying. Come, you have hardly said a word to me yet, and yet you rail against silence. That queer little gray bird compelled you to speak when I could not! By-the-by, what a beastly row it's making.' The cuckoo is, indeed, uttering its hideous two notes with unabated zeal. 'What are you thinking of? Tell me.'

'I was thinking of Miss Fairfax. She thought of me—thought I was tired. She was very kind.'

'To me, certainly—yes.'

'No, no, to me!' She turns to him, and lays her pale little cheek against his. 'Oh, I am so happy!' breathes she. 'And how lovely the night is! And how kind everybody is!' She pauses a moment. 'Miss Fairfax was kind.'

'She is always kind,' says Fenton.

'But kind to *me*. If she loved you, she

would not have given me to you as she did to-night. I was wrong, Sidney—I must have been. If she and I could have changed places to-night, I would have stabbed her, rather than have let her go away to—dance with you.’

Her voice has grown faint with passion, and some fear.

‘My dear child, stabbing is out of fashion. What ridiculous thoughts your brain harbours ! As for me——’

‘I don’t care what you think. I’d kill anyone who interfered with you and me. And’—slowly, growing a little calmer, with the calmness of despair—‘I’d kill myself, too.’

‘Don’t talk like that !’ says Fenton with a quick utterance.

‘Well, no, not again. And, besides, there is no reason. She doesn’t love you ; she sent you away with me to-night, and—do you remember ?—she sent me to lunch with you at the bazaar, the other day. Oh !’—clenching her little hands—‘I was angry then, but I am not now.’

‘A good thing,’ says Fenton, laughing, and taking the little clenched fingers, he opens them one by one.

‘She has a kind, kind heart,’ says Miss Royce.

‘Of course. People round here all call her an angel, you know.’

A brief silence. Then, ‘Would *you* call her that?’

‘Why not? You yourself see how kind she is, how superlatively good.’

Even a deeper silence falls upon this. Fenton has been taking to heart her speeches—those about Cecil’s not caring for him, her being willing to give him to another, and to help that other.

His thoughts grow concentrated. Perhaps, after all, this girl is right, and Cecil in reality does not care for him. If so, good-bye to his one chance of redemption, of rising out of his money difficulties. And, beyond doubt, Cecil has shown him little of love’s jealousy. She has thrown Miss Royce at his head many a time, though whether she meant it——

Perhaps she is angelic enough to be above earthly jealousies. . . . Into this deep question her voice breaks :

‘If you call *her* that, what do you call *me* ?’

It is Maden’s voice. A low voice—painfully suppressed—held back, as it were.

Fenton laughs ; his lighter mood is never far from him.

‘The very sweetest thing on earth,’ says he, taking her hand and opening the little half-clenched fingers negligently upon his palm.

His action, his words, or the manner of them, and his laugh, all tend to enrage Maden.

‘Don’t speak to me like that. Don’t !’—with a sudden outburst of suspicious anger. ‘*She* is an angel, and I am a——’

He lays his hand lightly on her lips, stifling the word.

‘Sh ! What a word for a little girl like you to utter ! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you bad child ! And, after all,

why reduce me to abject misery like this? I said you were the——'

'I don't care about that. I don't want such speeches from you. They are unreal—unreal'—passionately—'as you yourself are! Tell me that you think me more of an angel than she is. Oh no'—sharply, as if stung by some truth. 'Not that! Say that you hate angels. Oh!'—vindictively—'*how I hate her!*'

'You have hit upon a great truth,' says Fenton, with gravity. 'An angel would always be the deuce of a worry to most of us. I hope Fate will never force me to live with one. I'm afraid it would be bad for the angel.'

'Are you ever in earnest?' says the girl, her wrath still smouldering. 'Do you ever honestly mean anything? Is life nothing but a jest to you? Am—am *I* a jest to you?' Her small white face grows rigid. 'If ever you play me false,' says she, 'you will regret it to your dying day.'

It had been on Sidney's mind for a long

time to tell her that he is leaving on Sunday morning, the day after to-morrow. Fear of an outburst of distress on her part has hitherto held him silent, but now it occurs to him that here is a fitting opportunity in which to break the news. The old copy-book heading comes back to him. 'An opportunity once lost is never to be regained;' and though the somewhat frivolous retort of a distinctly frivolous person to this solemn admonition is to advise the sluggard to immediately 'make another opportunity,' the old adage holds good.

'Do you know what makes me so fond of you?' says Fenton. 'It is that your moods are so many, and so unexpected. You are Tragedy now, and all at once a most desirable Melpomene, and yesterday you were something else; and to-morrow—to-morrow you shall prophesy as to what you *will* be. You are one charming, everlasting surprise. But as to playing you false, my little tragedy queen, I shan't have time for that.'

‘Time?’

She looks up as if startled.

‘It is true. I shall have no time. That ought to bring the colour of relief to your cheeks. I leave this on Sunday next. So now, you shameful little unbeliever, what have you to say?’

‘On Sunday!’ The words can barely be heard as they pass her pale lips. ‘You are going!’ And then, ‘Oh, no, no, no; it *isn’t* true!’

She leans towards him, as if in an agony of apprehension, to read his face, and he can see that her body is shaken by emotion, that her small slender shoulders are trembling. Her face is vivid, eager. For a moment there is silence. Fenton, caught by the extraordinary despair and passion of her face and manner, remains speechless. There is not a stir, a movement in the night; the very music in the drawing-room has ceased, and there is nothing that redeems the monotony of the night save the ceaseless sound of the river—rushing—rushing always to its destiny.

‘It isn’t true,’ says Maden again, not sharply now, however, or with the smallest semblance of defiance or of distress, but in the dull tone of one who knows she is fighting hopelessly.

‘Why should it not be true?’ says Fenton. He speaks impatiently, annoyed by some new stinging feeling at his heart, hitherto unknown. ‘My dear girl, you didn’t suppose I was going to stay here for ever, did you?’

‘Once—you told me it was folly to think.’

‘Well, so it is, about one’s worries. This can’t be a worry, however. You have done little but quarrel with me since first I met you, so that I should think my departure will be relief. It will mean a cessation of hostilities, at all events.’

He has put on an air of lightness that he is far from feeling. Fear of a scene is on him. What will she do—say? If she goes back to the house after one of her usual storms, comment will be roused; if even with red eyes, people will notice

them. After all, he was a fool to tell her of his going to-night.

He is a little astonished—perhaps, so strange is one's heart, a little disappointed—when she says quite calmly :

‘ You are right. It will be a relief.’

‘ You take it like that, then,’ says he involuntarily. ‘ What a fraud you are, after all, Maden ! I quite thought you would be sorry.’

‘ Did you ? Why should I be sorry ? Are you sorry ?’

‘ I am, God knows !’ says he.

The words spring from his lips almost without his knowledge. It is the nearest approach to truth he has ever uttered to any woman, and, indeed, the spirit of that wet person who is supposed to live uncomfortably in a well (let us hope by her own desire) seems to have entered into him for one brief moment. The girl catches this honest sound, and holds it, and with the knowledge of it comes strength and courage.

‘ Well, I am not,’ says she. ‘ You are

right—you have troubled me. Once gone and . . . forgotten, peace will come back.'

'You mean that?'

'Why should I not mean it? Of course I mean it.'

'What a heartless little monster!' says he, striving after his old treatment of her, but failing utterly.

There is a genuine pique, and, indeed, a great deal more, in his tone.

'Ah, I am not the only heartless monster!' She laughs deliberately, yet so naturally that he hardly realizes that the mirth is forced. 'You have played with me a long time, have you not? I now can play with you.'

'That is not true,' says he, passion swaying him. 'I swear it—I swear that it——'

'Ah, "swear not at all." It is idle work. And, besides, there is no time! You know you said that; but I mean it, literally. I must go in.'

'No, no, not for a moment!'

He has caught her hands.

‘This very moment——’

She tries to draw her hands from his, and at this moment, whilst they both stand almost struggling with each other, the cloud that has lain so heavily across the heavens draws apart, and the moon shines out, glorious, resplendent in the majesty of her calm, and shines straight on the face of Maden.

On the strange, beautiful, now mocking eyes; on the delicate little chin, upturned as if in defiance; on the soft curling hair; on the parted crimson lips; on all the tender curves of her exquisite body, clad in its clinging silken gown of amber hue.

‘Maden,’ says he, in a low but vehement tone, ‘how dare you speak to me like that? You know you love me, as I love you.’

‘That is what I do not know.’

‘You do—you shall!’

He takes her almost violently into his arms, and holds her there. His heart is beating vehemently against hers.

‘There is “no time,”’ says she—evidently those words have beaten themselves into her brain—‘to thrash out that question. You are going. This is our last meeting—our farewell.’

Her voice sounds stifled.

‘Our last? No! I must see you again.’

‘You must!’

Some wild thoughts seize on her; she throws back her head and laughs, softly, imperfectly, but yet with some kind of terrible mirth.

‘What a strange girl you are! Why do you laugh? By heavens! sometimes I think I’d like to shake the life out of you!’ says Fenton savagely.

‘You forget,’ says she. ‘It is my many moods you love, my little varieties. I was Melpomene a while ago, and to-morrow I was to be something else. Well, I have only anticipated to-morrow. Take your hands from my arms; you hurt me.’

Her tone is imperious. He releases her.

‘You will see me again, however?’ persists he.

‘How can I, even if I would? To-morrow we go back to the Dower-house—I, and my charge, and my two warders.’ She laughs afresh. ‘Small time will be given me for a meeting with anyone; and, besides, is it not well as it is?’

Knowing her power now, she trades on it.

‘To-morrow evening——’

‘There were several evenings’—with a bitterness thrown back—‘when you said, or hinted, you would be down here by the river to meet me, yet you never came. I am not in a mood to bear that neglect again.’

‘I tell you that to-morrow night I——’

‘To-morrow night Mrs. Verschoyle may have friends to dinner, and your presence might be necessary for the entertaining of them. It has so happened.’

‘How bitter you are,’ says he, ‘and how unjust! Well, look here. You know the flags that Anthony sometimes waves on the turret to please his mother—the red to say all is well, the green to say he is coming to

see her next day. Well, I'll float that red flag to-morrow evening if all goes well, and if you see it you will come at nine o'clock ?'

'If I can'—languidly. 'And now really I must go.'

'Kiss me first.'

'So many kisses ! Are you not tired ?' says she, in a voice that might almost be bored. She laughs carelessly.

'Tired !'

She has to tear herself out of his arms.

CHAPTER XXV.

‘ I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me.’

CARRY is the first to bid her host adieu (and, of course, Lady Maria, who is her hostess as well as Cecil’s), and leave The Towers. She leaves very early—indeed, directly after breakfast—and seems, suppress it as she will, to be distinctly in haste to be gone. Verschoyle had begged her, first to remain to luncheon, and then to let him send her home in the pony-trap. But she would none of it. She had told her auntie, old Miss Desmond, that she would be with her at eleven, and as for being driven home, she would far rather walk.

‘ Carry, are you bent on crushing me finally ?’ says Verschoyle, at which Carry

laughs, and then, suddenly recollecting the memorable roll of tweed, gives in.

‘It would be a pity to exterminate you entirely,’ she says. The last word is an echo from her half-Irish breeding. ‘Well, thank you, I will take the pony.’

So it is arranged, and Carry, stepping briskly into the dainty little trap, drives off victoriously with the tweed sitting up beside her as straight as if it knew what wonderful things are to belong to it in the future. As Carry drives off, it seems to those looking on as though she has a big, bulging baby beside her.

Perhaps the poor tweed had meant to carry out its dignified deportment from The Towers to the very door of Tudor Hall; but if so, it is mistaken. Carry has hardly rounded the rhododendrons in the drive, when she hears a shout behind her, and lo! here is Amyot.

‘You may as well take me with you,’ says he, scrambling in beside her, and flinging down the tweed—the immortal tweed that is yet to play so many parts—

to the bottom of the trap. 'It will save Verschoyle some trouble, and he can send the portmanteau later.'

He pushes down the poor roll of cloth, until now it is made a mere footstool of by both of them. A footstool ! That cloth ! But from menial services many great things have sprung to fame. Perhaps the tweed thinks of this, because it lies unresisting, meek and still, beneath their desecrating feet.

'My goodness, Richie, what a tornado you are !'

'Well, as you were going my way, and as we are going to have that walk this afternoon, I thought I might as well come with you. You can drop me when I reach my place.'

'Oh no; better come on and see auntie. She'll give you some luncheon, and I know she will be dying to hear all the news.'

'Well, there you are to tell it.'

'Not I. Somehow, I've a clever knack of forgetting all the principal points. Now

you can help me to remember them. I say, Richie, shall we take our rods with us this afternoon? It's a dull sort of morning.'

'And a sniff in the wind, too,' says he, looking south-west. 'Yes, let us. You have one of my rods at your place, haven't you? I left it there last day; and your flies are as good as mine any day. And up there by the Droon——'

* * * * *

It is now very close upon noon. All the other guests at The Towers have gone except Cecil Fairfax and Lady Maria's contingent.

Lady Maria has been a little fussy all the morning—Mrs. Verschoyle a little anxious. Excitement is to children what dissipation is to its elders, and Jinnie, overdone by all the splendid joys of emancipation she has known during her visit to her uncle, the bazaar, and through the treatment generally she has received at The Towers, now finding these glories belong to the past alone, knows a collapse!

She had risen languid, weary, and most decidedly fractious. She didn't want to go home; she wanted to stay here with Uncle Anthony and the swans; 'twas nicer being here than at home; and so on—not all her mother's, and grandmother's, and Miss Royce's entreaties availing to bring her to a better frame of mind.

'She is quite upset, almost ill, poor little darling!' says the poor little darling's grandmother to Anthony, some time after breakfast.

'Then why take her away? Why take yourself away? She will be quite as safe here as in your place, and I should have the pleasure of your company, and'—laughing—'hers.'

'Yes, yes, I know, dearest. But——'

'She would be *quite* safe here,' says Miss Royce, who happens to be with Lady Maria.

Her voice really sounds quite natural, but to herself it rings false, hypocritical. Surely they will notice it, and it will betray her! . . . But, oh! to spend another

day beneath the roof that shelters *him*, with all the other guests gone!

‘Dearest boy, it is out of the question,’ Lady Maria is saying with decision. ‘I don’t think the child actually ill, though Jane protests she is. But Jane, as you know, is easily frightened where dear Jinnie is concerned. Now, I am not.’

Anthony laughs.

‘No, I assure you, my dear, I am not. I can see at once where real disease lies. But even if Jane’s absurd theory should prove correct, and the child *is* ill—which God forbid!—still, I think our poor little beloved will be better in her own home, and much nearer to that estimable and clever creature, Dr. Bland.’

‘That’s why you are taking her away,’ says Verschoyle; ‘though, of course, one can see at a glance that you are not in the least frightened about her.’

‘True, my dear,’ says Lady Maria, who is in her heart so perturbed about the ‘only Jinnie’ that Verschoyle’s little touch of irony goes by her. ‘I feel sure it is a

mere passing indisposition. Jane would make it out a serious attack, but I——’

‘Anthony’—all at once Mrs. Verschoyle is in their midst—‘I have come to tell you that Jinnie——’

She can go no further. Lady Maria, as pale as a sheet, is facing her—almost threatening her.

‘What — what — what ? Not more feverish ? No new symptom ? I told you, Jane, there was more in it than you fancied—you are sometimes so rash, Jane ! Where is the child now ? How is her temperature ?’

‘Quite normal, or nearly so,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle, smiling. ‘Did I frighten you ? I am so sorry ! I only wanted to tell Tony that the carriage might as well be ordered at once, as Jinnie has at last consented to leave him. There has been a good deal of bribery and corruption, I’m afraid, but still the point is gained. Why’—patting Lady Maria’s shoulder affectionately—‘you look quite pale ! Your mother, Anthony, is a perfect slave to Jinnie’s whims, and fears

each wind of heaven that blows upon her.'

'My dear Jane,' says Lady Maria, recovering herself, 'I have only just now been explaining to Anthony that it is you who are so foolish about the child.'

'I dare say we are all foolish together,' says Mrs. Verschoyle in her irresistible, conciliating way. 'At all events, I think home air will be the best thing for Jinnie, with a nasty dose from Dr. Bland.'

'Oh, poor little Jinnie!' says a new voice.

It is Cecil's, who has just come into the hall through the armoury door, followed by Sidney Fenton. As she passes Miss Royce to go to Lady Maria, she smiles at the former; but Miss Royce refuses to see the smile, letting her eyes fall to the ground.

Fenton is speaking to Anthony. After a minute, Miss Royce lifts her eyes from their obstinate stare upon the marble pavement beneath her, and glances quickly at Fenton. In spite of her resolution of the night before, there is question in her eyes

—nay, more, demand. Catching the swift glance, he reads it rightly, and answers it as he knows she wishes it answered. His eyes say as in a flash: ‘In a moment I shall be with you—a long moment to me—to hear what you have to say, and to——’

‘Miss Royce,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle, ‘the carriage will be ready in five minutes. Will you be so good as to go upstairs and see that nurse is wrapping up Jinnie very warmly and comfortably?’

Miss Royce hesitates—for a second only, however, before Lady Maria breaks in :

‘Oh yes, Miss Royce ; do, pray, go and see that the dear child is fully clothed ; one never knows how these slight illnesses may end. I assure you, my dear Jane, I have no apprehensions whatever ; but I hope, Miss Royce, you will see that her warm coat is put on her, and a silk handkerchief round her neck ; the throat is always so troublesome.’

Miss Royce, thus twice ordered, goes slowly up the hall and the broad old oaken staircase, and so out of sight.

Ten minutes later she comes down again with Jinnie, who is pale and red-eyed, and has all the air of a captive being driven to her doom, besides being so muffled in furs that one might suspect her of going to join Jansen on his Arctic trip. Both are swept by the anxious mother and grandmother across the hall and into the waiting carriage. A few last words are cried to Anthony by Mrs. Verschoyle as they start, and then twenty minutes' steady driving up hill and down dale brings them to the doors of the Dower-house.

Jinnie is at once taken up to bed. She is, in truth, very feverish now, and very languid. Miss Royce follows her slowly. Her whole nature is in revolt. After all that silent signalling between him and her, she had not been able—been allowed—to see him again !

‘Well, never mind !’ She throws out her arms recklessly. The halls are destitute of spectators. To-night at least is hers. She will go up and watch for the red flag.

CHAPTER XXVI.

‘Love walked among the fields of yellow waving
corn,
For the poppy blossomed red where his weary
feet had pressed ;
And my door stood ready open for a long-
expected guest,
But she never, never came, night or morn.’

CECIL FAIRFAX had been hardly aware as to how the time was flying. She had been wandering all the morning in the gardens with Fenton, and had only reached the hall in time to hear the discussion about Jinnie; and when Miss Royce had gone upstairs to see to the safeguarding of that valuable little person, Cecil had learned, with a kind of shock, that all the other guests were gone, and Lady Maria's party on the point of going.

Reluctantly it comes home to her that she, too, must go ; that, indeed, her adieus have been a little tardy in their saying. But it had been so sweet out there in those lovely gardens, with . . .

She does not dare to pursue that thought, yet the very side-glance at it that she allows herself brings the warm and generous colour to her cheek. Was ever garden so fair before ? Was ever day so bright ? Was there at any time an old house so beautiful as this ? Oh, how happy she has been during these past few days !

She had indeed thought, dear, foolish virgin ! that her fool's paradise was a veritable heaven.

But now she must go.

‘ Has my carriage come, Anthony ? ’

She steps lightly to Verschoyle's side. Lady Maria and her party have gone their way, and Fenton, too, has disappeared.

‘ Yes, an hour ago, ’ says he ; ‘ but I ordered it round to the yard, as you were not ready for it. I was glad you were not ready. ’

Verschoyle is altogether unaware of that long, sweet, dangerous wandering about his gardens, having been engrossed by Lady Maria's troubles all the morning, and those smaller trials that come under the head of hospitality, such as speeding the parting guest, and so on.

‘Do you know, I felt a little aggrieved at first when your carriage came. I said, “What a hurry she is in to be gone—to leave us !”’

He smiles at her—a little reproachfully.

‘Oh no, not that—far, far from that!’

Something in the intensity of her manner, so unlike her usual calm, sets his heart beating.

‘Don’t stand here in the draught,’ says he quickly. ‘Come into the library while you’re waiting. I’ll send a message, but you know it will take a little time.’

‘Send word, however.’

‘Yes.’

A servant passing by at this moment, he calls to him that Miss Fairfax will want

her brougham at once, then follows her into the cool, large library.

It is a charming room, with two huge windows opening on to a veranda outside, from which steps lead to the gardens. Inside the room is charming ; all round the walls are lined with bookcases, guiltless of the ungenerous glass that forbids one to touch a wanted volume on the inspiration of the moment. To have to wait and open the glass doors, sometimes even to unlock them (but this last is barbaric, positively actionable, and should be put down by law), destroys the inspiration, and leaves one a prey to murderous inclinations.

Cecil, as she moves, knows that there are many flowers in the room—not small flowers, but great sweet-scented bunches of flowering shrubs gleaming from costly jars, whilst on the crystal writing-table is a bunch of roses. A few rare and exquisite engravings line the walls where the bookcases leave room, and here and there may be seen a charming water-colour by some

well-known artist. It is a room to love—to live in.

Miss Fairfax, glancing round her, tells herself this with a start, as though for the first time, after all these years, it has come home to her that it is Anthony's room.

Although now it is well into the month of June, a little fire, brilliant if small, is burning on the hearth. With all the windows open, and the gay winds sweeping in and out at their own fond will, the heat of it is hardly perceptible, and Anthony is of opinion that no modern ornamentation of any kind can outdo the honest fire; that is the real ornament.

‘You really meant that?’ says he presently, when she has cast herself happily and luxuriously into a big armchair of the right sort, and he, standing with his arm on the mantelpiece, is at liberty to look down and admire her. Such heartfelt admiration—so true, so earnest, so honest.

‘Meant?’ She glances up at him, her beautiful face a little curious, not at all apprehensive.

‘That you were not in a hurry to leave?’

‘So far from that’—she pauses to laugh, softly and happily—‘that I acknowledge I’m quite sorry to go.’

‘Yes?’

He has taken his elbow off the mantel-piece, and has come a step or two towards her.

‘Yes? Is that a question? My dear Anthony, if you put me to it, I’m afraid I must confess that I should rather like to——’ She pauses. ‘Oh no, I shan’t go further than that.’

Her mirth is of the idlest, the merely happy manner of one speaking to an old friend, with no *arrière pensée* whatever. She rises as she speaks, and goes nearer to the fire and him, standing, indeed, on the hearthrug close beside him.

‘We have tastes in common,’ says she prettily. ‘I, too, love a fire somewhere in the house all the year round.’

‘If——’ begins he. But he does not go on. To speak to her here, now, in his own house! Impossible!

‘ If what, Tony ?’

‘ Oh, I don’t know ; I quite forget what I was going to say.’

‘ Just like a man,’ says she, with a little indifferent air. And then, after a pause : ‘ What a delightful time you have given us ! I don’t know when I have enjoyed myself so much. And everybody says the same. You make an admirable host.’

‘ Nothing more than that ? Must I take my laurels as a host—*only* that ?’

‘ Why, who can say,’ says she, ‘ how the years may develop you ? You may be posing as something better far, a year from now.’

‘ That would be my ambition,’ says he. . . . To pose as her husband !

‘ One’s ambitions so seldom come off,’ says Cecil. ‘ May I poke the fire ? It is getting very low, and I love a blaze.’

Her light dress of pale blue crepon, with its pretty ribbons, is perhaps a little too summery for the day, which has now clouded and darkened, and looks distinctly sullen. A little chill, indeed, has fallen on the air.

‘What is there that you may not do?’ says Verschoyle, in a low voice.

He does not even attempt to take the task out of her hands. He cannot, indeed, resist the delight of seeing her poke his fire in his house, almost as though she were the mistress of it. Oh that she were !

She is bending over the fire, trying to compel a blaze, breaking a little block of coal to get the desired effect, but without success.

‘How obstinate !’ says she, laughing, and, going to the scuttle, she draws out a little slack and throws it quickly upon the slumbering fire.

She had hardly arranged for the result. As she still bends over it, the fire breaks into a mad blaze, unexpectedly, gloriously, and the bright flames, perhaps in revenge, go straight towards the crepon frock, and finding it very friendly, Miss Fairfax—in one minute, as it seems—discovers that she is on fire.

A mere momentary agitation, of course.

Anthony has beaten down the flames, without so much as an injury to his hands, and all that comes of it is a scorched side to Miss Fairfax's pretty gown, and the memory to Anthony, which lasts for ever, that for a full half-minute he had had her in his arms, close against his heart. And all is over now, at all events, and she is lying back in that comfortable chair, looking very pale, but half amused.

'I don't care in the least,' says she, 'as your hands have not been hurt. Let me look at them again.' He gladly lends them for inspection. 'No'—thoughtfully—'nothing. And yet, Anthony, out of much smaller beginnings terrible things have arisen.'

'Your frock is a terrible thing,' says he, glancing at it.

'Oh, nonsense ! As if a frock mattered ! Why, I might have been burnt to death if you had not been here.'

The smile flies from his face ; he grows pale.

'Even if I had not been here, it was the

slightest thing. Oh no, you could not have been burnt.'

He speaks like one frightened by a thought hardly to be borne.

'But indeed I might' — laughing a little nervously, as though impressed by his manner. 'And more: I might have burned down your beautiful house, which would have been far, far worse.'

'Don't!' The word comes from him sharply, painfully. There is a ring of acute physical anguish in it. Then, with more calm: 'How can you talk like that, Cecil—and to me? That you—you should be hurt! Do you think my house, or anything I have, could be weighed in the same scale with you—Cecil?' He goes straight to her, and, catching her hands, compels her glance to his. 'A moment ago you began a speech, but you never ended it. May I know the ending now?'

'Oh, that!' she laughs. His face is so quiet that not the smallest inkling of his meaning enters into her. 'It ought to have been lost sight of in view of this over-

whelming tragedy.' She glances at her burnt skirt with a smile. 'What I was going to say then was, that your house is so charming, your entertainments so delightful, that I should like to take up my residence here once and for all. For ever !'

She laughs again, the happy laugh of one whose mind is untroubled, but almost as it breaks between her lips it dies away. Passion has overcome his calm at last. His face is white as instinctively he goes to her and lays his hands upon her shoulders.

'Stay—*stay for ever !*'

He releases her a moment later, and goes on more quietly :

'You think the house beautiful. Is it beautiful enough for you? Will you have it?'

'No, no!' She has risen to her feet, her face as white as his own. 'Don't, Anthony— not another word ! . . . There is no need for another word.'

'No, of course not.' His voice sounds a little hoarse, a little unlike his own, but by a supreme effort he has recovered him-

self. He has stepped back from her. 'And yet, another must be said.'

'Not another!' cries she in a stunned little way, putting out her hands as if to ward something off. 'It is useless.'

'I can see that, but still answer me, Cecil, if only for the old friendship's sake. There's—someone else?'

'Ah, you should not ask me that.'

She is trembling now, and all at once he knows that his suspicions, hitherto only half grounded, are true. It is Sidney Fenton she loves.

'I am terribly in fault,' says he. The shock of this discovery has brought him back to his senses, and he is looking at her with such nerve that she almost cheats herself into the belief that he does not really care. The wish is father to the thought, and she is glad to grasp at this reading of his manner. 'I know I have behaved as no man *should*—in his own house—to his guest; yet'—with a sort of honest defence of himself—'as many a man *might*! I have gone out of my way, indeed, to make

you regard me in a bad light. But you will forgive me, Cecil ?'

'Dear Anthony, you know it.'

She holds out her hands to him in the dearest way. Her eyes are full of tears. As he sees them, his self-possession again fails him. He crushes the beautiful white hands between his own.

'Don't look at me like that. I don't deserve a tear of yours. I have behaved abominably. To speak to you here . . . I couldn't help it.'

He stoops and presses the palms of her hands to his lips, one after the other.

Suddenly he looks up.

'It is Sidney,' breathes he.

He feels that he *must* know. If it is true, her eyes will fall, her cheeks flush—the truth will show itself. . . .

She does flush, faintly, delicately. And then a haughty light wakes in her eyes. She draws her hands out of his. . . .

Five minutes later he is in the hall to see her off. Her carriage is at the door, and Sidney Fenton is beside her, laughing,

uttering some absurd jest, to which, for once, she seems a little indifferent. Her air is absent.

As she goes down the steps and into the carriage, Anthony takes her hand; her fingers tighten on his.

‘Don’t hate me,’ murmurs she.

Her tone is hurried; she seems hardly to know why she says it.

He makes no reply, but there is a look in his eyes that haunts her for many a day and night afterwards. It is, indeed, with a strange reluctance she bids him good-bye, and hears him give the coachman directions to take her to her own home. Sidney has sprung forward to say a last word to her, his handsome face looking handsomer than ever to-day, yet her last look is for Anthony, and a strange, superstitious feeling that in leaving him—refusing him—she is leaving all good behind her, troubles her on her homeward way.

For all that, it is Fenton’s sunny smile she carries into the house with her, and dwells on all the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XXVII.

‘A wolf’s cub will be wolf at last,
Though all its days with lambs are passed.’

DISSIPATION has, indeed, been the undoing of Jinnie. Arrived at home, her irritability assumes alarming proportions, and her temper, a little treacherous at the best of times, now knows no bounds.

At four it suggests itself to her mother that the doctor alone can cope with these difficulties, and Dr. Bland, ‘that delightful and useful creature,’ according to Lady Maria, is sent for. He says at once that Jinnie is a little *done*, a trifle feverish—at which dreadful word Lady Maria’s heart dies within her, and rapidly her mind runs to typhoid, scarlet, even brain fever. She has, indeed, almost arranged a fitting

epitaph for a child cut off in the flower of her youth and beauty, when Dr. Bland again breaks in.

‘Nothing dangerous. Nothing, really. Must be kept perfectly quiet, and *never* alone ! No excitement, however ; no unreasonable arguing about this or that—in fact, give her her own way’ (this advice is superfluous). He will call in again in the morning.

‘Not to-night?’ in a suppressed tone of agonized fear from Lady Maria.

Oh no ! quite unnecessary. He will write out a little prescription which they will send for at once. And above all things, she must not be left alone. She seems a little overstrung, a little excitable.

‘Ah, yes, darling child ! So abnormally clever,’ breathes Lady Maria.

The doctor nods. He has his own ideas about Jinnie, and though fond of her, as most people are, would often like to prescribe for her a sound whipping. She gives him a fiendish grin now, as he bids her adieu, and, afraid of laughing in the

face of the extreme gravity of her grandmother, he beats a hasty retreat.

‘ You see, she must not be left alone, Jane,’ says Lady Maria directly his back is turned.

‘ Alone ! of course not, dearest. If you will stay with her now, until I have finished my letters——’

‘ Certainly, my dear. And—er—don’t hurry with your letters, Jane. I—I should like to stay here’—absently, as if thinking.

‘ You mustn’t tire yourself ; I shan’t be very long. I, of course, shall sit up with her all night ; but don’t you think Miss Royce could remain with her during our dinner-hour, and a little beyond it—say from half-past seven till ten ?’

‘ Until twelve, surely, my dear, considering you are going to sit up the rest of the night.’

‘ Oh no. I shall send her to bed at eleven. I don’t think she looks very strong, poor girl ! Of course we shall be in and out, you and I, all the time.’

She speaks in the voice of one troubled

by extraordinary anxieties. Of course neither of them see the ridiculous side of the question, and the tremendous and wholly unnecessary fuss they are making about a mere attack of indigestion, consequent on undue excitement and over-indulgence in cakes and sweets. What mother and grandmother ever could ?

Miss Royce, when told a little later of the programme laid down for her for this evening, makes no remark. This is as well, perhaps. From half-past seven until ten she is to sit in dear Jinnie's room, to soothe her if she wakes, to watch over her if she sleeps. A little mutinous expression gathers round the corners of her scarlet lips as she receives her commands, and there is a touch of distinct insolence in the air with which, always silent, she turns and leaves the drawing-room.

But in the hall—alone—with no one to see her, her wrath bursts forth. She is voiceless as in the room she has just left, but her face, her gestures, are eloquent. The little touch of French blood in her

declares itself now. To stay ! To wait beside that child whilst *he* is waiting for her in the copse below ! No—a thousand times no ! A black rage takes hold of her, her whole face is darkened by it, and she stamps her foot upon the marble pavement beneath with a force that almost hurts her.

It is a nurse, then, they would make of her, a mere servant ! What further indignity are they inventing for her humiliation ? What fresh insult are they preparing for her ?

And now another thought coming to her in the midst of her hot wrath, she pauses, paling a little. Had they heard ? For a long time she has suspected Mrs. Verschoyle of suspecting *her*. Has she discovered something about to-night's assignation with Sidney ? and is all this pretended anxiety about a child who is suffering from a mere bilious attack but a ruse to keep her—Maden—secured in the prison of Jinnie's room, so as to leave him free later on to marry Miss Fairfax ?

Like lightning the thought rushes through her impetuous brain, and as quickly she believes in it. Oh, how mean! How detestable! Well, grinding her small teeth, let Mrs. Verschoyle do her best, or her worst, to thwart her—and—let her succeed if she can. There is a saturnine smile on the little flower-like face that transfigures it out of all beauty as Miss Royce goes up the stairs to her own room. No, the white teeth close again ominously. Not Mrs. Verschoyle, for all her spying (poor Mrs. Verschoyle!), or Lady Maria, or all the devils in hell, shall keep her back from her tryst to-night. The smile grows almost contemptuous as she enters her room.

At half-past seven precisely she goes to Jinnie, who is sleeping the sleep of the just, allowing Mrs. Verschoyle, who is sitting by the child's bedside (afraid to leave her, though she sleeps so soundly—on account of the doctor's orders), to go and dress for dinner.

‘What a pose!’ thinks Miss Royce with

a curling lip ; she regards Mrs. Verschoyle's anxious face as a clever piece of acting. But she settles herself near the bed with an air of elaborate if sullen determination of never leaving Jinnie again until ten o'clock strikes.

But at a quarter to nine Jinnie's room has no occupant save Jinnie alone, who is still asleep—but now tossing and tumbling amongst her pillows restlessly—whilst Miss Royce, with flying feet, is running across lawn and meadow towards the flowing river, and to the copse beyond, where love lies waiting for her !

The dainty cambric gown that she is wearing, and which she made herself with the intuitive sense of perfection that belongs to her, and that has made her dread the extreme charm of Cecil Fairfax's face, floats behind her in the delicate night breeze, and on her dainty head is the little red cap she so much affects—in private. A little red cap that belongs to the days that have nothing to do with the days at the Dower-house, and that she loves with

a singular affection, as though it embodied in its redness and coquettishness all the liberty, however marred with unpleasantness of many sorts, that she had ever known.

Her thoughts fly with her—and before her. Will he be here, waiting for her? Or will she have to wait for *him*? Oh no! A laugh springs to her lips. Not after that last scene with him yesterday. He will be here, only too glad to come. It is *he* who will be waiting this time.

* * * * *

She is right. He is here, though sorely against his better judgment. All day he had played with the question: Should he, or should he not, go to meet her? without arriving at any answer. Her face, as last he remembers it, was mutinous, passionate, even forbidding, and with a strength of obstinacy in it of which he had not believed her capable. It was this unforeseen factor, this unexpected strength, that had warned him to go no farther. If he were to go, to see her again, how

would it be with his determination to marry Cecil Fairfax? Cecil was not one to trifle with, and that girl could be troublesome—if abominably pretty. Better see her no more . . . and going as he is to-morrow . . . No, he will *not* go to meet her; yet all the time, even as he swears this to himself, he knows that he will go; and, indeed, as after dinner he passes through the halls, and into the moonlit garden, it is not Cecil's face that he sees, but the dark, eager, passionate, lovely face of Maden Royce. It accompanies him all the way to the little copse below, near which the river runs with eternal energy, slowly, desperately, as if fighting with time and change; even when he has seated himself on a fallen trunk of a tree to wait for her, it is still clear, still brilliant—*so* brilliant that when, suddenly lifting his eyes, he sees her coming towards him—an elf belonging to the wood, as it were, a slight thing in a floating gown and a crimson cap—for a moment he regards her as an apparition!

He throws his cigar far from him, rises, goes to her, and in a moment, with a low but merry laugh, she has flung herself into his arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

‘From this bleeding hand of mine
Take this sprig of eglantine,
Which, though sweet unto your smell,
Yet the fretful brier will tell,
He who plucks the sweets shall prove
Many thorns to be in love.’

‘I HAVE been waiting for hours,’ says Fenton after a while.

‘Do you good,’ says she saucily. *His* having been here first has given her fresh confidence, and an air of victory that sits charmingly on her piquant face. ‘You thought *I* should be the one to hurry to our trysting-place; but now you see! Hah!’—gaily stepping back from him, and defying him with a charming gesture—‘*now* you see!’

‘ Yes, I see.’

His tone is full of admiration. He sees *her*, at all events—this exquisite little sprite, in her light frock and scarlet cap, posing amongst the grasses and the leaves. There is a touch of sadness in his air. It occurs to his pleasure-loving nature that it will be hard to leave her, yet ruinous not to leave her. And, besides, he is at his last gasp so far as money is concerned, and to support her as well as himself. . . . Impossible!—not to be thought of for a moment.

The sadness of his voice has touched her. Has her pretended carelessness hurt him? All at once her mood changes, and step by step she draws nearer to him, her hands held out.

‘ Don’t mind me,’ says she sweetly. ‘ I like to vex you sometimes, you know, only to—to know that you love me—to make you show it. But I won’t again—oh, no, no! I am sure now that you love me, and me only. You *do*’—laying her hands lightly on his shoulders, and gazing

into his eyes with 'eyes that speak of love again'—'don't you?'

'You know it,' says he a little huskily. The supreme moment has come. He must tell her now or never. The selfishness of the man overcrowds his love—that is, the contemptible feeling he would call by that name—and in the very midst of her tenderness for him he deals her a death-blow. 'You know it.' His voice is almost indistinct in his agitation. 'And that is why I hate to think of the hour—the hour now very near—when I must leave you.'

Her arms are still round his neck.

'Leave me!' Slowly, slowly the loving arms loose their hold, and she falls back a little. He would have held her, indeed, but something sinewy—strong—in the slender body evades his grasp. 'You are going, then?'

'Yes, of course'—irritably, because of his agitation. 'You must have known——'

But she brushes all that aside.

'Will it be soon?'

‘To-morrow.’

For the life of him he could not have said another word—softened the announcement.

Silence falls upon them.

He had expected an outburst—one of her mad, wild expressions of reproach and grief combined; but, to his amazement, she receives his news with extraordinary composure. He can see her face quite plainly. It is uplifted now to the east, where the first star of night is peeping from behind a pallid cloud, and thought alone lies on it. She is thinking—calmly, earnestly, dispassionately. No sign of passion or distress disfigures the beautiful features.

All at once she lowers her glance to his.

‘It isn’t true, is it?’ says she in a little vague sort of way, that is always, however, quite calm.

He nods his head.

‘Not to-morrow? *That* is not true?’

Her eyes are wistful and gentle, and

they search his as if sure of a denial of the dreadful truth.

‘Going I *am*,’ says he with a brutality born of his nervous horror of the misery he can read through her extraordinary calm. ‘Come now, Maden. Would you have me give up my profession just because you want me to stay here a day or two longer?’

She ponders for a while.

‘I shall never see you again, then,’ says she in a stony sort of way.

‘What nonsense! The world is a small place, and Ireland (we are ordered to Ireland) is only a few hours’ journey away. At any moment I could be back here. Come, do be reasonable, darling.’

‘Why, I will,’ says she. She overcomes herself. Her face is very white; but she smiles at him most naturally. If this is to be the end of it all, well, she tells herself, it shall be a good end. ‘And so you are going?’ says she. ‘And to-morrow! And is it a very delightful place there, where you are going? Ah!

it will be more amusing than this place, any way.'

She laughs lightly.

Fenton, a little taken aback by her change of mood, and not clever enough to see the terrible restraint she has laid on herself—the mad courage that is sustaining her—says regretfully :

'I don't know. Gayer, perhaps, but not happier. *You* won't be there, for one thing. I shan't have you to talk to.'

It is the refinement of cruelty, though, to do him justice, he does not mean it. He is, as usual, thinking of himself only, with a great pity—inasmuch as this little charming companion will have dropped out of his life, leaving him so much the poorer.

She turns her eyes on him for a moment.

'True; but there will be somebody there after a while.'

'Maden!'

Really, her callousness on such an occasion as this shocks him.

‘I said “after a while”—not quite at once. You will not forget me in a day or two, will you?’

‘You know that I——’

‘Oh, yes, yes, yes!’ She pulls her little cap off, and runs her fingers quickly through her dark hair. ‘You won’t find it easy to replace me, will you?’ With the courage of despair—with a sort of miserable pride—she makes a dainty little *moue* at him. She looks lovely as a dream in the still moonlight, with all the leaves around her, and the moon above her, gazing at him from under her long lashes, with her most provoking air—the air of a born coquette. But, oh, the anguish at the heart of this poor little coquette! ‘You see, I am not like everyone,’ says she, braving it to the last.

‘You are not, indeed,’ says he moodily. ‘There is no one on earth like you. But how coolly you take all this—with a laugh, by Jove! whereas I——’

‘Oh, you—you!’ She points a little jesting finger at him. ‘How do *you* take

it—with a tear? And how would you have *me* take it—with tears, too? No, no! Why should I cry for you, when you will not cry for *me*?—when you *will* leave me!’

‘I leave you because I must—because I am a poor devil at my last penny. But I love you—I——’

‘Better than Miss Fairfax?’

Even in this supreme moment her undying, her unconquerable, jealousy of Cecil Fairfax, born of so true an instinct, rises to the surface.

He catches her suddenly and presses her to him.

‘Yes — well; but answer!’ commands she breathlessly.

‘Look here,’ says he. ‘This is probably our last hour together, and I swear to you that if Cecil Fairfax were the only woman in the world, I should never love her.’

‘If she and I were drowning,’ persists the girl, with a faint touch of passion, ‘which would you save?’

‘You—and you know it.’

‘And yet you leave me! There, *go*.’ She pushes him from her, and runs away towards the opening in the glade that leads to the path beyond. Here she looks back. ‘You will write to me?’

He reaches her side again.

‘The very moment I get there.’ He has no hesitation at all about saying this. Indeed, in his present mood—in his grief, that for the moment is real, at losing her—he would have promised anything; and, beside, he is quite an adept at writing love letters. They are, as a rule, of the briefest; but, then, he can put so much into them—so much that sounds a great deal to the receiver of them, so little actually! ‘You were going,’ says he reproachfully, ‘without even bidding me good-bye.’

‘Good-bye!’ She echoes the word forlornly, and all at once, as if the meaning of it has come home to her, and has thus killed her cruel pride, she breaks down, and trembles violently. The tears rush to her eyes, and fall over her ashen

cheeks. ‘Oh, I cannot—I *cannot* say it!’

She flings her arms round his neck, clings to him for a moment wildly; then, dragging herself away, rushes like some wild, wounded thing through the under-wood, and out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

‘Yet weep I not for human misery,
Nor for the stars’ complaining,
Nor for the river’s wailing.
I weep for thee alone ; most miserly,
Keep all my tears for thee !’

RECKLESS, desperate, she makes her way back to the house, some last remnant of sense compelling her to hope that she may gain it without her absence having been discovered. With a view to this she enters quietly by a side-door. From this, however, she must cross the entrance-hall to gain the staircase to her room, and in this hall she finds herself confronted by—Lady Maria !

The elder woman’s face is a study of suppressed anger and disgust, and the girl,

after one glance at it, reads her doom. Somehow the knowledge, instead of further depressing her, raises her already overstrung nerves to a very dangerous pitch, and a mad inclination to laugh aloud is the one desire she knows.

‘Come in here,’ says Lady Maria, pointing to the library door.

She speaks quite quietly, but the deadly anger beneath her composure is quite clear to Miss Royce. Instead of daunting her, as I have said, it only augments the passionate rebellion in her breast. How can she, who has lost all, care for the petty wrath of this old woman?

‘I thought you understood you were not to leave my grand-daughter until ten o’clock,’ says Lady Maria, her beautifully-modulated voice still under full control.

‘I am not your grand-daughter’s maid!’ retorts Miss Royce insolently.

‘That is quite true. You are her governess, however, and she was left in your charge. It was late, no doubt, to expect

you to sit up with her; but she was your little pupil, and she was very ill.'

'If the child was as ill as you seem to think,' says Miss Royce, with a shrug of her slim shoulders, and a slight increase of the insolence she has already shown, 'I think her mother would have been the proper person to sit beside her and look after her.'

'I suppose you know,' says Lady Maria calmly, 'that you are being very impertinent?'

'I'm not so sure of that,' says Miss Royce, with a bitter little smile. 'But I am clever enough to know that anything a person in my position may presume to say to a person in yours, calculated to offend, is always *called* impertinent, however just it may be. For the rest, I did not engage with you as nurse-maid to your grand-daughter—to see her through all her childish diseases—but to teach her her lessons.'

'One of her lessons, I presume,' says Lady Maria, still keeping her temper

admirably, 'has something to do with propriety of conduct. To be out of one's house until ten or eleven o'clock at night comes hardly under that head.'

'There are times,' says Miss Royce in a low, furious tone, 'when everyone in this horrible world feels they must be alone!'

She stops, as if choking.

'Were you alone to-night?' asks Lady Maria mercilessly.

'What is that to you?' says the girl, turning upon her so fiercely that anyone else might have shrunk from her; but Lady Maria, her old keen eyes unflinching, looks back at her expectantly. 'Would you spy upon me night and day? I tell you—and your question confirms it—I am never alone! You grudge me even a moment to myself.'

This is very far from the truth, but passion now has caught and is swaying her. Lady Maria and Mrs. Verschoyle, if cold and unbending, have always been scrupulously kind and just to her, and very considerate.

‘It is Jinnie, Jinnie, all day long with you and that child’s mother,’ goes on Miss Royce, with extraordinary violence. ‘What was I beside her? I, too, am a human thing, who can know grief and joy, and love and hate, as well as another; yet what was I to you? Nothing! Nothing but a machine to work your will, and look after the child you love. But it is all over—*all!*’ She makes a tragic movement with her arms, throwing them out and a little upwards. ‘I am not your slave!’

‘I am very glad to know that you are nothing whatever to me,’ says Lady Maria, with such perfect calm as seems actually cruel in the face of the other’s passionate excitement.

‘I shall not stay here,’ says the girl, who has grown reckless now.

‘I think that very probable.’

‘I suppose you imagine you are dismissing me,’ says Miss Royce, with a sudden smile, so vivid, so contemptuous, that for the first time Lady Maria’s self-possession gives way. She frowns. ‘But you make

a mistake. It is I'—superbly—'who am dismissing you!'

Lady Maria's frown disappears. She looks amused.

'In the meantime,' says she politely, 'I would suggest to you the advisability of going back to your pupil's room. Mrs. Verschoyle, whose motherly instincts you seem to rate so low, has been with her the greater part of the evening. She went up there, indeed, directly after dinner—to find you gone. You misjudged her, you see, when you thought you could safely desert her child to-night without fear of discovery. Mrs. Verschoyle is not the sort of mother to leave her child entirely to the care of a—hireling !

Lady Maria feels a little ashamed of this later on—so much so, indeed, that she refrains from all mention of it to Mrs. Verschoyle.

'I shall not go back to Jinnie's room,' says Miss Royce with cold decision. 'Send one of your maids if Mrs. Verschoyle wants assistance. I am not a servant ; and, besides'

—deliberately—‘I have come to the conclusion that I dislike children.’

‘You prove yourself not only insolent, but heartless!’ says Lady Maria.

She rises and rings a bell.

‘I am not heartless!’ bursts out the girl violently, whose heart, indeed, at this moment is filled with almost unbearable agony. ‘It is *you*—and *yours*—who are devoid of all feeling! I——’

Lady Maria makes a slight but imperative gesture.

‘Leave the room!’ says she curtly.

It is the last straw. So might she have spoken to, so might she have dismissed, one of her housemaids.

Miss Royce stands choking with rage for a moment; then, still speechless, turns and walks, not only out of the room, but out of the house, and into the cold, sweet chillness of the night air.

* * * *

It is very dark now. Above, the stars are all afire, and the tops of the firs are silvered by the light of the crescent moon;

but down here, amongst the trees, the shadows in the thick parts of the plantation are very dense.

She had run with all the speed of an enraged creature when she had passed impetuously through the open hall door, and had not ceased to run until these shadows overpowered her; but now she pauses, hesitating a little, as if sobered suddenly by the change from light to dark, from the heat of the room behind her (how far behind her now, to all intents and purposes!) to the soft-blowing wind about her, and . . . utter desolation!

She pauses, as if trying to place things; and then suddenly it all at once comes home to her. She is alone! No home—no friends—no lover! *Nothing!* And *he*—he will be gone to-morrow! . . . She flings herself face downwards on the grass. ‘Thou sayest it . . . I am outcast!’

A dry, gasping sob breaks from her. Oh, dear God, to be dead, and done with it all! To cease!—to be silent, deaf, sightless, without thought!—to *feel* nothing!

For many minutes the wild, untutored heart thus beats itself out against its bars, and then she rises wearily. A sort of passionate longing arises within her to go back again to where she had last seen him, to fling herself on the damp, dewy grass, and kiss the place where his dear footsteps trod—to go where she will never, never, *never* see him again ! And presently, with grief and despair and hopelessness dragging at her tired feet, she goes down to the ash grove.

Coming to the river, she pauses and watches it for a moment eagerly, hungrily, then goes on again, looking back at it now, and now again, as though it draws her to it, but still resisting it. No, no ; there will be time for that . . . afterwards !

Presently she goes down the soft, deep bank, mossy and still sweet with the later autumn flowers, and now the grove is before her ; and *now* . . .

She stops, uplifting her hands to her face as if to check the cry that rises to her lips—the wild outcry of joy, of passionate

delight, that is making her tremble from head to foot. For there, in the darkness beyond, to which she has now grown accustomed, she can see the tiny red glow of a cigar.

He has not gone, then ! He has *not* deserted her—he is still here ! A thrill of rapture rushes through her. All her sadness, her depression, is gone ; her eyes grow brilliant ; a brilliant colour, too, springs to her pale face. Oh, what a good, what a gracious world it is, after all ! *He*, still, is *here* !

Alas that it should be so ! With a sob in her throat she runs to him, fleetness and fire now in her little feet, so tired a moment ago.

‘ Sidney ! ’ cries she in a strangled voice ; and, indeed, he has barely time to rise and catch her before she falls into his arms.

‘ Maden, my darling, what is it ? ’ asks he, his voice as filled with astonishment as with anxiety. To come back again at this hour !

‘ I have left them for ever ! ’ gasps she

presently. ‘They were cruel—too cruel! I shall not go back! Take me with you, Sidney—take me!’

‘This is madness!’ says he, frowning but paling, as he feels the little living, beautiful creature throbbing within his arms.

‘Not this,’ cries she, clasping him closer; ‘but it *will* be madness indeed for me, if you leave me here! They have cast me out—oh, those devils of women! . . . and where—*where* shall I go? . . . Besides’—with a strange and rapid change of tone—‘I want to go nowhere except where *you* are, Sidney.’ And now, throwing herself back to look at him: ‘You *do* love me, don’t you?’

‘You know it!’—passionately, the passion, in spite of him, breaking through the prudence that warns him that to give in now will tend to his undoing in the future.

‘Ah! Then it is all right!’ cries she, with the little broken, happy laugh of a tired child. ‘And you *will* take me with you!’

‘You don’t know what you are saying,’ stammers he, a revulsion of feeling making him put her slightly from him. ‘I cannot take you with me. I am at my last penny—stone broke.’

‘I don’t care ; I will work for you, slave for you, scrub for you. *Only* . . . let me be with you.’

‘Maden !’

‘Oh, I know—I know, but I don’t care !’

‘This is mere temper,’ says Fenton. ‘You are angry with Lady Maria and the rest of them, but it will blow over.’

Even as he thus fights against her, and against all his instincts, he wonders at himself. This girl—a mere waif and stray, or a little obscure nobody—has so far influenced him that, in opposition to his real easy-going nature, and his conscience that is easier still, he argues with her, with a view to saving her from herself and his undeniable desire for her.

‘It is not that,’ says she. ‘If that were all, Lady Maria and I would have had no

words to-night. But I knew, when you told me this evening you were going away, that I could not live without you. If this quarrel had never happened, I should still have followed you.'

She looks at him, her eyes on his, gleaming in the moonlight—and there is no shame at all on her lovely face.

'Do you know what you are saying?' asks he hoarsely. His arms have tightened around her. 'I have told you I cannot marry. If I were a rich man, Maden . . . that would make all the difference. I could then—honourably—take you away from all this misery, but——'

'I don't want you to marry me,' says the girl quietly. 'I don't want you even to think of anything that might chill your love for me. Let me be *with* you . . . that is all I ask.'

'Is your reputation nothing to you?'

'Nothing is anything to me—but you!'

There is a long silence. Then his better angel touches his elbow once more, and surely he must, in his own careless way,

have loved her above most, when he answered to that angelic suggestion.

‘I cannot let you do this thing,’ says he.

His voice is firm again, his air resolute. He makes an effort to put her from him, but she clings to him the more, pressing her soft lips against his cheek.

‘You can—you *must*.’

‘No!’

He almost flings her from him.

She catches a branch, and for a little while looks at him searchingly.

‘Go, then, if you will,’ says she, in a low tone. ‘Put me out of your life, once for all. But remember’—slowly—‘I shall not have the courage to face life without you.’

‘You will find another home,’ begins he, like one who does not know how to word his sentence.

She helps him here.

‘You are right. I shall, indeed, and speedily. I shall find it—*there*!’

She points to the deep and flowing river to their right. There is no passion, no

vehemence, in her gesture ; yet a terrible certainty that she means what she says makes his blood run cold. That little slender figure . . . lying beneath the ever-moving river . . . cold, senseless, with wide, dead eyes. . . .

With a stride he catches her again, and holds her to him. His heart is beating madly.

‘ Remember, it is your own doing,’ says he hoarsely, selfish to the last.

CHAPTER XXX.

‘Charity suffereth long, and is kind . . . rejoiceth not in iniquity . . . believeth all things, hopeth all things.’

THERE is considerable consternation in the Dower-house to-day. Miss Royce is gone ! Her bed had not been slept in last night, and the prettiest of her gowns is not now hanging in her wardrobe. Lady Maria, if repentant at the idea of being over-harsh to her some hours ago, is for all that very angry and disgusted.

‘You know, Jane, I said nothing—nothing *really*, to drive her to running away ; but, as I have often said to you, she was not a person to be trusted—to be allowed into any respectable household.’

This is such an astounding piece of news,

that naturally Mrs. Verschoyle grows a little bewildered.

‘I quite thought you liked her, even admired her,’ says she at last.

‘My dearest girl! Surely you forget. *I* to say a favourable word for that miserable creature, who so shamelessly neglected our poor little darling! Oh no, Jane! I certainly thought her pretty——’

‘I thought her vulgar,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle.

‘Did you? Well, this last act of hers proves it. To go like that! But of course there was a man connected with it somewhere. She was too pretty for her station in life. You may remember a conversation I had with you about her beauty, and I told you then, my dear Jane, that it was one of my first causes for distrusting her. I quite recollect saying that that sort of person should be ugly.’

It seems hopeless to argue with her, and Mrs. Verschoyle, who is wise in her generation, gives it up.

In the afternoon, Anthony, with Fenton

and Mr. Browne, drop in for tea, and once again the perplexing question is threshed to the bitter end.

‘Mammy says she went away in a tantrum,’ says Jinnie, in the middle of a most engrossing argument as to Miss Royce’s leaving thus suddenly, whereon everyone stops short, and Mr. Browne bends an inquiring glance on Jinnie.

‘What sort of a vehicle is that?’ asks he. Even on the most solemn occasions Mr. Browne finds a difficulty about refraining from mirth. ‘Two wheels or four?’

At this Captain Fenton laughs aloud, and Mrs. Verschoyle, who almost unconsciously had been studying his features, now turns aside. Oh no, of *course* not. He has had nothing to do with the girl’s disappearance. He could not laugh so lightly if—— It was inexcusable—*unpardonable* of her, to have harboured such a thought for even a moment.

‘I assure you, all I said was that she should not have neglected Jinnie—that she should not have been out so late. It was

quite half-past eleven,' says Lady Maria, addressing Captain Fenton. 'I'm *afraid* I suggested to her that she had gone out with a view to meeting somebody, and, of course, without *proof*.' Lady Maria spreads her long, little, wrinkled, jewelled fingers abroad, in extreme self-depreciation. 'That was abominable! I *know* she went out to meet nobody, and that temper alone has been the cause of her sudden disappearance from amongst us. Don't you?'

'I think it probable,' says Fenton. 'But then, you see, I knew so little of her, beyond meeting her here, and in some of the houses round.'

'True.' Lady Maria pauses. 'I regret that suggestion of mine, however,' says she presently, in a low tone.

'We must all regret,' declares Mr. Browne suddenly. 'Regrets come by the hundredweight. Do not, however, I beg of you, dear Lady Maria, give up too much time to the one associated with Miss Royce.'

He is smiling genially, but is there

meaning in the smile? Again Mrs. Verschoyle glances at Fenton, but Fenton is smiling too.

‘Regret is another word for folly,’ says he, breaking into Dicky’s disquisition. ‘Take my word for it, Miss Royce knew very well what she was about when . . . Ah!——’

He stops suddenly. Cecil Fairfax has just come in.

‘Is it true?’ asks she, in a little grave way, holding Lady Maria’s hand.

‘Quite true,’ says Fenton, who has followed her up the room. ‘And I have just been allaying Lady Maria’s touches of conscience by telling her that I fancy, from what *I* have seen of Miss Royce, she is quite capable of arranging her own plans. She struck me as clever. Eh?’

‘What I think,’ says Miss Fairfax—her beautiful face still grave and anxious—‘is, that she will soon come back again. It was a childish freak—a fit of anger. Oh, I hope it will be so. How’—a slight suspicion of tears gathering in her eyes—

‘how *pretty* she was! Didn’t you’—to Fenton—‘think so?’

‘Yes, distinctly pretty,’ says he indifferently.

‘You think she will come back,’ says Verschoyle, leaning forward.

He has been watching her face—the only face in the world for him—and has marked in it the almost divine grief and longing for the return of the girl who last night had run away from them. There is no censure in the gentle eyes—no horror, no disgust, only pity and forbearance, and a desire to see her safe once more.

‘Oh, I *do*,’ cries she, with something in her soft voice that might almost be termed vehemence. ‘I feel sure of it: don’t you?’

Again she addresses her words to Fenton, as if his opinion alone is dear to her, a fact that Verschoyle, with a sigh and a slight frown, acknowledges. Fenton, on his part, is conscious of a sense of amusement that is not altogether without its bitterness.

‘I have not studied her,’ says he. ‘But

you are doubtless right. Criminals'—he laughs lightly—'always return to the scenes of their crimes. Isn't that what the sages say?'

In his soul he is hoping, and, indeed, is certain, that Maden will never again revisit Hillesden.

'Poor little girl! I liked her,' says Cecil gently.

Her glance is still for Fenton, and now at last, so direct is her gaze, he loses in part his self-possession.

'So did I,' returns he haltingly. 'She was very original.'

'*I loved her!*' cried Jinnie. 'I hope she'll come back soon. She told me stories, sometimes, about fairies and things. A queen fairy there was always, and a king one, too. And the king one was like you, Sidney.'

A rather uncomfortable silence follows on this, though why, no one can say. Mr. Browne, who is always full of resource, breaks it.

'Jinnie!' inquires he anxiously, 'who

was the fairy queen like? Me, wasn't it? *Take time.* Sort of delicate kind of beauty like mine. Eh?'

'No, she was like Cecil,' says Jinnie. 'Fair and tall, and big, *big* eyes.'

Cecil laughs.

'Miss Royce herself was far more like a fairy queen than I am,' says she. 'But you and I, Sidney, should feel complimented. Evidently she admired us both. Poor little thing! I wonder where she is now?'

'Yes—so do I,' says Fenton agreeably.

'Had she any money?' asks Verschoyle, as if struck by an uncomfortable thought.

'Most fortunately, I paid her her salary two days ago,' returns Mrs. Verschoyle. 'So she has enough for the moment—for a little time—at all events. I am so glad to know that. Because I really think she would have gone away, even without what was owing to her, she was such a queer, proud, passionate girl.'

'She left a great deal of her clothes

behind her,' says Lady Maria discontentedly.

'She will have to come back, so,' says Jinnie hopefully. 'She loved that little blue blouse with the sparky stones. Perhaps she'll come for it to-morrow.'

'Perhaps so,' says her mother.

But Miss Royce comes back no more to the Dower-house, and presently the delightful sensation her romantic disappearance had created in Hillesden dies away, and people begin to forget her. It takes but a very few days to do this, and, indeed, before September has half gone by us, things have settled down again. Mr. Popkin has returned to his wooing of the reluctant Carry, and Miss Langley-Binks to her pursuit of the dejected Richie. Fenton has left The Towers, with a promise to return shortly after Christmas, and a tender pressure of Cecil's cold little hands that means very little to him, but enough to her to make her dream of, and long for, the coming of the new year. Old Miss Desmond has begun to tremble at

the near approach of November, when she will have to pay up that overdue old loan of twenty pounds, of which but ten is producible. And Carry — Carry has begun to put in motion the machinery of her grand plot.

CHAPTER XXXI.

‘What thou intendest to do, speak not of before thou doest it.’

THE plot itself had been maturing for a long time in her busy brain, but the winning of the tweed at the late bazaar had brought it forth. She had heard several times of how people made very handsome weekly sums out of the sale of their rabbits, and being a most excellent shot as women go, she had even tried her luck with those cunning little beasts; but somehow the swish-swish of her petticoats, go as delicately as she could, always gave them the warning signal, and the flash of their little wicked white tails was all she ever saw of them as they disappeared into their burrows. Of course,

there was an occasional success, but that counted as nothing to a girl eager, and longing with an almost passionate desire, to make money out of the troublesome little wretches that destroyed darling auntie's garden—to compel them to pay off the debt that lay on the poor old lady's head, and troubled her night and day, and so put an end to it for ever. It seemed such a trivial sum. Ten pounds! Any day, every day, kind-hearted people give twenty times that sum to deserving charities; but, then, Miss Desmond would have no charity given to her: nor, indeed, did anyone, save Richie, know of the trouble she was in. For all that she kept locked in her own old sorrowful breast.

But Carry, you see, had thought of a plan to help her—a plan that Miss Desmond would not have listened to for a single moment—at which, indeed, her decorous and beautiful old hair would have risen with horror; so Carry said nothing about it to her, and smuggled the bundle of tweed up to her own room,

without so much as Miss Desmond's being aware of its presence in the house—a deceitful proceeding that became a stern duty under the severe probity of Carry's heart. If auntie cannot help herself, then, foul means or fair, auntie must be helped.

This is the evening when the successful smuggling was accomplished, and Carry, having secured her bedroom door against all intruders, lays the precious bundle on her bed, and opens it.

My goodness, what a lot there is of it ! Why, there is enough here to make a dress for auntie, and a skirt for herself, besides leaving plenty over for . . . Carry sits down on the edge of her small snowy bed, and goes into agonies of silent computations.

Presently she rises, opens a drawer in the old cupboard, takes out a certain garment, and lays it prone upon the bed beside the precious tweed. The garment shall be nameless ; it might shock the sensitive nerves of a few if it was given openly to the world, and why draw

unnecessary blood? Carry herself has evidently no fear of the garment in question; so little, indeed, that presently she is measuring it, and pinning some of the delightful tweed on to it, and cutting here, and snipping there, until at last the pliant tweed has grown somewhat into the shape of the 'nameless thing' on the bed. There is, however, one change that must be made. Carry stands, scissors in hand, frowning over this. Yes, certainly . . . the tweed replica must be a little fuller about the kn—— But if so . . . How perplexing it is!

It is quite late before Carry goes to bed.

The delicate morning air, stealing in through her open window, wakes her. Her first thought is for her work of the night before. Flinging herself back on her pillow, she regards it with great admiration. It is hanging on the door of the wardrobe opposite, and is only pinned together, but even so it answers all her expectations.

Never again, when she goes out shooting, will she find her silly skirts knocking against, or else being caught in, the briers, and so giving those wily rabbits a chance of escape. Now they will never hear her coming. And what a good thing that Richie had taken the trouble to make her so excellent a shot ! Really, Richie is an invaluable friend ; but even to *him* this must never, *never* be told. Nor to auntie, either. They—it is awfully silly of them—but she feels sure they would be mad with her. But if Richie were to see her ! He might, you know. ‘ Well ’—recklessly—‘ I don’t care ! ’

She is out of bed by this time, and has flung her window a little wider to listen to the morning song of the world outside. Such duets, such trios ! Such sad sweet monotones ! All this enters into her ; but presently she comes back to the mundane present. To ensure the success of her scheme she must go down to-day to old Murphy, who lives a little outside the village—old Murphy, who buys in

all the rabbits, hares, wild-fowl, and so forth, for the London market, besides keeping an inn. If he will help her (and surely he will, for her father's sake), then she will take out the pins from that strange garment over there, and bind it safely together with needle and thread, and then 'go a-hunting.'

The afternoon sees her in the little town, close to Murphy's inn, a distinctly guilty look upon her face. It does seem a little dreadful, having to come here and ask Murphy to buy, perhaps mythical, rabbits. How can she be sure, even with the help of *it*, she will be able to shoot them? Still, Murphy, in this her hour of need, is her only refuge, and so, after a second struggle with herself, she walks up boldly to Welcome All, as the good Murphy *now* calls his house, though once it had been only too well known as the Sign of the Flea.

Mr. Murphy, a native of Cork, had left the city of the Lee in his earliest youth, and finding himself after many years in

the neighbourhood of Hillesden, with some small means in his possession, had set up there an inn, and in a moment of what he fondly deemed to be brilliant inspiration had called it by the above too suggestive title.

To him, it seemed a truly lively name for his new venture, and he quite chortled when the hanging sign, drawn and painted by a travelling 'artist,' was hung over his door. The artist had transformed the flea proper into a huge brown grasshopper, being perhaps too delicately minded to paint the real thing; but in spite of his noble effort towards civilization, Mr. Murphy insisted on the name being written in clear print above (so as to avoid mistake, perhaps), and the grasshopper as he stooped, in a painfully poised position, seemed only too ready for a pounce.

Altogether it was too realistic, *too* lively, and customers fought shy of Murphy's inn — so shy, indeed, that presently the brilliant propounder of its name found himself on the brink of bankruptcy.

It was then that Mr. Desmond—who for some years had been doing his best to get through the acres of Tudor Hall—had come forward to the help of his countryman (poor Mr. Desmond was always trying to help everyone, except himself), and, with the lavish generosity that had ruined him, had by a timely cheque set up the bankrupt Murphy once again in life. It was not money thrown away. Murphy changed the title of his house—‘’Twas unlucky,’ he said—and called it, as a more hopeful sign, Welcome All. This the many cockneys who stayed there off and on changed to Welcome Hall, which, of course, gave it quite an astonishing push, seeming patriarchal and aristocratic. After that, indeed, Murphy had prospered amazingly, whilst his benefactor went lower and lower, until kindly death seized him.

No one could accuse poor Mr. Desmond of drinking, of gambling, or of unfaithfulness to the wife who died before him, and adored him to the last; but, still, all things

went. He had run through his own property in Ireland, and then through his wife's in England, and all in the happiest way. He was one of the most regretted men, in his own world, when he died.

* * * * *

‘Can I speak to you for a moment?’ says Carry, walking through Mr. Murphy’s door and into his shop, with all the speed and nervous energy of one who has been for hours making up her mind to a plunge.

Murphy, who is standing behind his counter, comes quickly forward. He has small, twinkling eyes, an abominably long upper lip, and a most pleasant air.

‘’Tis an honour ye’ll be doin’ me, miss, to spake to me at all,’ says he with immense bonhomie, largely mingled with respect.

He is a big man, with a wonderful stomach, and this he strokes affectionately as he regards her.

‘Oh no,’ says Carry. ‘To tell you the

truth, Murphy, I want you to do something for me. I'—nervously—'I'm a little troubled.'

Murphy looks at her.

'Trouble is worse than murther,' says he sententiously. He opens a small door that leads from his shop to a tiny parlour within. 'Come in here, Miss Carry, an' tell me all about it.'

Carry follows him. The little room is neat and cosy, though a smart fire burning in the grate renders it uncomfortably warm. But the big man's face has a touch of sympathy in it that smooths her way for her.

'It isn't *my* trouble, Murphy,' says she. 'It is Miss Desmond's. She——' She stammers a little.

'An' how is she?' asks the Irish giant tenderly. 'Fegs, 'twas only a month ago I went by yer house, an' I saw her, an' grand the old lady looked, praise be! But if she's in any way pressed, Miss——'

'Well, she is, Murphy, and—and it has occurred to me that I might, with your

help—make things easier for her.’ Poor Carry’s eyes now are full of tears.

‘Faith, ’tis like yer father ye are,’ says Mr. Murphy, with quite unbounded admiration. He is leaning against his round mahogany table. To *sit* in company with a Desmond would never have occurred to him. ‘Ye have a plan in yer mind now, I can see, an’ proud I’ll be if I can help it out. Himself’—meaning the late Desmond—‘was the divil all out at thinkin’. Why, I remimber’—here he grows enthusiastic—‘whin the Sheriff himself came down here an’ thried——’ Here he breaks off suddenly, finding himself on tender ground. ‘Ah, he was a great man—a great man entirely!’ says he, slowing off very cleverly.

At this Carry tells him that her desire, her hope, is to kill the rabbits on her aunt’s property, and give them to Murphy to sell in London.

‘I know you have many other people who supply you with rabbits.’

‘That’s thrue, miss.’

‘And therefore I know I am a great trouble to you—even asking you to help me.’

‘Throuble ! An’ is it throuble ye’d be spakin’ of to me, who would not be above ground this minnit but for yer father ! Throuble isn’t a word, miss, to be used between you an’ Jim Murphy.’

‘You are kind—too kind,’ says Carry in a little choking way. Oh, he *will* help her, then !

‘Kind ! No,’ says Jim Murphy ; ‘’tis yer father was kind to me. An’ I’m tellin’ ye this, miss, that yer father’s daughther is all the world to me.’

‘But I want you to understand this, Murphy,’ says Carry, her face pale and her eyes a little strained, ‘that, of course, I can’t supply you with as many rabbits as the others can, and perhaps——’

‘Not a ha’porth o’ difference would that make in my thrade,’ says Mr. Murphy. ‘One here and there can always go to market along with the others.’

‘One ! Oh, I think I can send you a

great many more than that every week,' says Carry eagerly.

'The more the merrier, miss. The fac' is,' says Mr. Murphy, leaning towards her, and speaking in a low voice, 'that I've quite a big business in London now. But that's tellin', ye know, an' 'tis only herself'—his wife—'knows it; an' I leave it to you, miss, dear, not to repeat it, or I'd have all my prices raised wid these divils round here. Your father was a good friend to me, miss, an' Jim Murphy ain't the one to forget it; an' ye may bet yer life, miss, that I'll do what I can for ye wid the rabbits! But'—Mr. Murphy's face lowers, and his eyes seek the ground—'if I might, widout givin' ye offence, say a word, 'tis that I'm sorry to me heart, miss, that you should have to come here to-day to ask this thriflin' service of me.'

'It is not trifling, Murphy, and I shall always remember your kindness,' says Carry.

With a certain dignity she extends her hand to the giant before her, who clasps it

as if it is an empty eggshell, bowing the while.

‘I’m thinkin’, miss dear,’ says he, having released Carry’s hand, ‘that maybe ye’d be wantin’ someone to carry down here the little bastes for ye, when kilt. An’ ye know, Miss Carry, that ’tis the world an’ all to git boys now to do anythin’—even barrin’ the expense of payin’ thim. But there’s that farm on Clover’s Hill, miss—ye heard I got it, belike? An’ three times a week I’ve got to go past yer gates to reach it, an’——’

‘Yes, I heard; and I was so glad you got that farm,’ says Carry cordially.

Indeed, there had been a rather sharp competition for the farm in question when it came to the hammer; but Murphy, who was then what he called himself in the bosom of Mrs. Murphy (who was all his family), ‘a warm man,’ had bid above all others, and so became master of the coveted bit of land.

‘Thank ye, miss. Any way, ’twill make it aisy for me now to help ye in this under-

thakin' o' yours. I'll be at yer gates widout fail three times a week, barrin' axidents, an' if ye can manage to send somewan to the enthance-gate wid the rabbits to meet me on thim occasions, I'm thinkin' it may be savin' a thrifle of throuble to ye.'

'You are always thinking, Murphy, of other people, it seems to me,' says Carry gratefully. 'You are very good to me, at all events, and I can hardly say how obliged I am.' She pauses, drumming her fingers on the table. 'You—you *won't tell anyone*, will you?'

'Not I, me dear—no, nor Mrs. Murphy, eyther. You aren't goin', miss, widout a cup o' tay? Herself is out, but she'll be in in a minnit, an' quite put out, miss, if ye go widout a sup o' somethin'. A glass of madeira, miss, now? Yer poor father——'

'I'm afraid I can't stay any longer,' says Carry; 'but you can remember me to Mrs. Murphy, and tell her I shall never forget how kind you have been to me, Murphy, and how grateful I feel.'

‘Arrah, nonsense, Miss Carry! an’ what are ye sayin’ at all, any way?’ says Murphy, looking extra firm because of the tear in his eye. ‘Grateful is not a word, miss, from you to me—but from me to *you*. All I have in the world I owe to you an’ yours.’

CHAPTER XXXII.

Think, timely think, on the last dreadful day,
How you will tremble there, to stand exposed,
The foremost in the rank of guilty ghosts,
That must be doom'd for murder!

Think on murder!

IT is half-past five, and the pale gray light of the lovely September morning is spreading over the dull expanse of lawn that runs in its neglected fashion southward from the porch of Tudor Hall. It is now lighting up, in delicate misty fashion, the thickly-wooded sidelands that slope also southwards and somewhat to the west, and lays bare the sandy-looking soil below in the tall bracken, its green now tinging to yellow, and the small dwelling-places of those tremendously domesticated people, the conies.

The gray light, growing more mellow now (perhaps in spite of itself), is gathering round a figure standing just inside the copse on the left, and peering intently towards the lively warren below. It is seemingly the figure of a slim and graceful lad, gun in hand, and clad in knickerbockers and a short loose coat. The stout little boots that cover his feet prove the latter to be remarkably small for even a lad of his size, and the legs, with their long stockings, are thin to a degree. On the head of this silent, watching, waiting boy sits a Tam-o'-Shanter, that gives him quite a coquettish air. Boys are not, as a rule, coquettish, and thus this cap—or is it the cap, or the knickerbockers, or the entire ensemble?—gives him the air of a juvenile, if delightful, masquerader.

Bang—bang! The report rings through the still, misty air, and the boy runs sharply down the hill, to find three rabbits waiting for him—though through no over-powering desire of their own. Quickly catching them up, with a half-frightened look to

right and left, he hurries up the hill again, but very little burdened by the weight of his bunnies. He has hardly reached the top, however, when a loud cry from below reaches his ears :

‘Hi, there! Stop, you young rascal! So I’ve found you at last, have I? Stop, I say, or, by George! I’ll put a few ounces into you.’

For a moment the lad stops as if petrified, casts a hasty glance behind him down the hill, from whence the voice evidently comes, and then, with a vehement exclamation, flings the rabbits into a hole beneath a beech-tree—flings an armful of dried leaves over them (even in this supreme moment the young reprobate does not forget to hide them), and then races away at the top of his speed.

Excellent speed, too. It leaves the man behind—puffing and blowing up the hill—very far in the rear by the time he gets to the top of it. Perhaps rage had a good deal to do with the puffing and blowing—you know it is impossible to give a really

good swear running at your best uphill—because now, when the pursuer, looking round him, sees nothing in view, no prey, not even a pair of heels, he gives way to a short and naughty word, and is evidently so much the better for it that anyone might feel quite sorry for him, in that its expression has been so long delayed.

The boy, still running, but now a long way off, suddenly finding himself in an intricate place—all briers, and trailing dog-roses that trip one's footsteps at every turn—stops affrightedly, and looks back in tremulous fashion. Not such a hero as one might imagine, after all; a very sorry coward, plainly.

‘ Oh, it was—it *was* Richie !’

A little turn of the head, and an overhanging bough knocks the Tam-o'-Shanter off the boyish curls, and Carry Desmond stands revealed in the tweed breeches and coat the bazaar had so kindly provided; in boots and long stockings—in fact, in a rational costume. The New Woman, no doubt, will applaud Carry. But, alas !

Carry herself is ashamed of it; and yet never in her life has she looked so well. This ought to touch the Old Woman!

The way is thorny before her, in every sense, and she makes an effort now to gather up her petticoats, so as to conquer successfully the briars in her way. But petticoats there are none to clutch, and again she dashes boldly through the angry tangle, in a haste that might be called frantic, because of the fact that Richie is somewhere there behind her, and may even now be on her track.

She has picked up the cap and placed it once more upon her shapely head. Carry, who had never been regarded as even good-looking, though, somehow, everyone admired her—that is, *herself*—now, in this extraordinary costume, looks charming. Half a boy in her nature, this dress appeals to her in some strange way, so that she instinctively responds to it—and thus, delighting secretly in the part she is playing, looks better than ever she looked in all her life before. Fine feathers un-

doubtedly make fine birds, but poor Carry had never had fine feathers. But these new ones, that are so far from being fine, suit her, as often some chance fancy dress—hitherto the last thing that would have been thought of by its wearer—happens to be the one thing most suitable to his or her style.

‘Fancy it’s being Richie,’ breathes she, still running.

Her thoughts run with her. The rabbits, of course, are safe. He certainly could not have seen where she threw them, and this afternoon she can get them again, and leave them with the others where Murphy will find them, and take them away. It is the second week of her venture, and already she has made four pounds. Why, shortly—very shortly—she will be able to give auntie enough to pay that hateful debt—and without her knowing a word about it, too. That is the principal thing. Poor darling old auntie would be so distressed at seeing her in . . . She looks down at them.

But four pounds already !

And all honestly earned. Murphy had at first—at least, she *thought* he had at first—made an attempt to give her more than he gave the others, but she had asked about things, and now she knew it was all right. And, indeed, it was ! Murphy, who would willingly have doubled the price of rabbits where she was concerned, had seen, after a short interview with her, that it would not do, and had given in. It was the easier for him to do this, in that he found she was an excellent shot. ‘A raal clever crathure,’ he called her. ‘An’ the divil wid the gun.’ He was, indeed, so filled with admiration that he would fain have praised her high and low ; but he knew how she felt about it, and he kept her secret as he would have kept his life.

Carry, now finding herself unpursued, continues her way more slowly to the house.

It is only a little after six o’clock. Auntie, who never rises before nine, will

be safe in bed, and if she has missed getting her usual number of rabbits, still, she will gain something in the fact that she will not have to circumvent the maid-of-all-work, who is generally on the prowl when she comes home in the morning. She has been driven by this 'general'—general nuisance, Carry calls her—to enter by the drawing-room window at times, the assiduity of the 'general' being so great as to block the ordinary ways of doors. But this morning, if Richie has stopped her money-making, he has, at all events, made it possible to her to get back to her room unseen by anyone in these too, *too* modern clothes, and perhaps indulge in a good sleep before breakfast. Any way, auntie can't hear of her escapade *this* time.

After all, she finds the respectable doorway entrance still denied to her; the 'general' had secured everything last night, and the hall door must evidently have successfully clicked after Carry's morning departure. Never mind—the

drawing-room window is always a gentle friend.

She slips through it now, and through the somewhat ghostly room itself, and upstairs—one stair at a time, though really there is nothing to be afraid of, as auntie, of course, is in her deepest slumber; and so along the corridor, and so to the turning to her own room, and so into—auntie's arms!

Not literally. . . . In this dim and darkened tiny corridor, lit by but one window at its end, and that shrouded by curtains, the light is only just visible, and Miss Desmond, in a trailing dressing-gown that has seen an eternity already, finding herself standing between the quasi light and a frightful burglar, gives way to a spirited scream.

‘Stand back, fellow!’ cries she valiantly, ‘or I’ll call my niece!’

This admirable defence seems to cow the burglar. ‘My niece’ seems, indeed, a word to conjure with. ‘My niece,’ however, is now trying wildly to slide behind

a big old-fashioned stand on which some cloaks and hats are hanging. This sliding suggests to Miss Desmond the idea that he wants to get to the other side of her—her back, in fact—and there to make a speedy end of her.

‘You would murder me!’ cries she shrilly. ‘But beware! I have but to raise my voice, and a dozen minions will surround me. Go, you bold, bad man, before the worst befalls you.’

Poor old Miss Desmond, her eyes now starting from her head, but her outward courage unimpaired, sees the awful thing behind the stand creeping further and further towards her, as she fondly believes; as a fact, the ‘awful thing’ is standing stock-still, frightened out of its life.

‘Ha, would you?’ cries Miss Desmond. ‘Would you murder a defenceless lady? Then take your doom. John!’—with the air of a Viking—‘call Miss Desmond! Carry!’ There is real meaning in this cry. ‘Fly to me. Thomas! Michael! William! Ho, there! Come this way.’

There is not a John or a Thomas or any other man in the household, and perhaps the knowledge of this lends a truly heroic command to the old lady's voice. Perhaps it is this knowledge, too, that makes her turn to the burglar. 'You hear, man? Run, I advise you, whilst you can—or would you stay here to be flayed alive? Ho, there, Thomas! run—run *this* way; you are taking the wrong turn. Here, in this corridor! And bring the gun, William—your master's blunderbuss, and his bloodhound. It will take you *all* to capture this bloodthirsty scoundrel. Carry! Carry! *where* are you?'

'Oh, auntie!' says the bloodthirsty scoundrel, whose knees are now shaking together, though it must be confessed her soul is shaking with laughter. 'I am *here*! Don't you know me?'

Miss Desmond comes to a standstill; she lifts her eyes. The daylight, now growing so bold as to fight with the curtains that overhang the window, has conquered them . . . and is revealing all

things. The shabby corridor, the old woman in her even shabbier magenta dressing-gown, the disconcerted conspirator in her terrible male attire. Even in the midst of her embarrassment and genuine fear, Carry feels a sense of resentment against that magenta gown, and with the resentment knows angrily that she is rather tickled by her aunt's appearance, although, in spite of the antiquity of her garments, Miss Desmond is notably neat and nice and dainty, as she always is. Oh, well, never mind; the rabbits will make that old dressing-gown disappear into the limbo of the past, when once the debt is paid. . . . She has no time for further thoughts.

‘It is you!—*you!*’ says Miss Desmond, who has now drawn quite close to the terrible apparition. And then, ‘Oh, Carry!’ cries she, in the tone of one who would say, ‘May God forgive you!’ after which the poor, pretty old soul bursts out crying.

‘Oh, auntie, don’t do that!’ exclaims

Carry, stricken to the heart, and beginning to long, like Rosalind, for something to cover her legs. ‘Why—why should you be so sorry about it? After all, auntie, now, what have I done?’

‘Done? Look at you! Oh no’—weeping afresh—‘*don’t* look at yourself! Oh, what a disgrace! And you, who have always been such a good girl, Carry, and so well brought up, and now to dress yourself in—in——’

It seems impossible to her—of course, it would be impossible to any modest-minded maiden lady—to continue this sentence.

‘I’m a good girl now,’ says Carry a little rebelliously.

‘In those clothes!’ Miss Desmond does not look at them, but waves a hand in their direction. ‘Oh, Carry, I thought you the last to so far forget yourself!’

‘I have been forgetting *myself* indeed,’ says Carry a little bitterly. ‘I have been thinking only of——’

Generosity checks her. She cannot say the ‘you’ to this trembling, frightened,

and, as she well knows, adoring old woman.

‘Of whom?’ This hesitation has only added to poor Miss Desmond’s tears. ‘Carry, where have you been? Where have you come from? Who—*who* have you been meeting? My darling child, confide in your old auntie. I know girls—sometimes—have lovers.’ Miss Desmond had not been of the lucky ones. ‘But what sort of man can he be, my dearest, to require you to dress up like that? Oh, he must be a most conceited fellow, to wish you to look like—like’—giving way to grief once more—‘himself.’

‘Lovers! What on earth are you thinking of, auntie?’

Carry stares at her with unbounded astonishment.

‘I am thinking of the fact of your stealing out of the house at such an early hour. Carry darling, tell me who you went to meet.’

The latent sense of humour in Carry here takes fire.

‘Rabbits,’ says she.

‘Rabbits?’

‘Yes—bunnies. They don’t love me, however, with the ardour with which I love them. Look now, auntie; I’ll tell you all about it. You know those dreadful rabbits that are always making havoc of your garden—that are even worse than the hens? Well, I had heard that Murphy—you remember him? down in the town, you know—is buying rabbits right and left for the London market; and I thought if he would buy ours it would help us a lot, and give us money to pay that abominable debt.’

‘Oh, my dear, that debt!’ says Miss Desmond, conscious of a fresh twinge of the fear that has saddened her all the summer.

‘So I went to Murphy, and he was very good about it, and seemed quite anxious for our rabbits; so I determined to shoot them.’

‘You?’

‘Yes; why not? You know I am an

excellent shot, though I say it as shouldn't. Richie taught me.'

'But—but how does all this explain your present—attire?' says Miss Desmond.

'The rabbits must explain that,' says Carry. 'It seems they can't bear petticoats. They rustle, don't you see, and the bunnies are so wary that they can hear the slightest sound. It had to be the debt paid, auntie, or—no breeches.'

This awful word reduces Miss Desmond once more to the verge of hysterics.

'Better—far better—be in debt to the end of our days than have you so lost to all sense of decency,' sobs she. 'Carry, take them off—take them off *at once*!' She points vehemently to the lower part of Carry's figure. 'Oh, have you thought, child? Have you considered? Oh!'—incoherently—'if your poor mother could only see you now!'

Instantly Carry is conscious of a sense of deep gratitude that her mother is *not* here to see her. Memories of sound and handsome spankings come to her mind. The

late Mrs. Desmond, though sweet and kind and lovable for the most part, had had at times—her moments! The gratitude therefore is permissible; though afterwards comes the comforting recollection that even if she *were* here, Carry herself would be too big (too old would have had no deterrent effect upon her mother) for spankings of any sort.

Then from mother to father her mind runs quickly. That laughter-loving, easy, happy-go-lucky father seems now almost present to her.

‘Dad would have liked them,’ says she a little disconsolately.

She stares down at her extraordinary garments, and half unconsciously pats the lower—the most outrageous—of them with a kind, brown, friendly little hand.

‘Oh, your father!’ says Miss Desmond, with would-be disparagement. But all at once she, too, remembers the tender, large (too large) heart of her brother, and all his goodness to her all his days, and she lapses into silence, trying to forget how

the very largeness of that heart had reduced them all to poverty. Presently she rallies. 'I suppose even your father would have liked his girl to be a girl,' says she.

'I think any father would like his girl to do all she could to help those she loved,' says Carry.

'But not at such a sacrifice. Do you think I would sacrifice you to pay this debt? No, no! Nor would he.'

'There is no sacrifice,' says Carry.

'There is—there is. Go and take off those dreadful things, Carry. I cannot bear to see your face above them. I never thought I should turn my eyes willingly from your face until—now.'

'Well, willingly or unwillingly, you shan't turn it from me even now,' says Carry; and, with a swift gesture, she catches Miss Desmond's face between both her hands, and compels her to look at her.

'Come, now. Did I ever look so well in my life? I should have been a boy, auntie; and if I had been, oh, how I should

have plagued you! and how you would have loved my plaguing! As it is, I am only a girl, but not so useless, after all. I shall be able to pay that horrid old debt, and, as a protection against burglars, I am **AI**. You know how I frightened you, who are so full of pluck. My goodness, auntie! where did you learn all the bad language you hurled at me? I'm shaking still.' She slips her arm round Miss Desmond's shoulders. 'I remember every word of it; and in this attire, and with that slang repertory, I shall be able in the future to terrify any decent burglar out of his wits.'

Miss Desmond is not proof against all this love and wit. Her last chance of dignity is to change the subject.

'You are cold, my poor child,' says she, clasping Carry's fingers.

'No wonder, after the fright you gave me. But you are cold, too. I'll tell you what: I'll light a fire, and get us both a cup of tea.'

'But—but you'll change your—your—'

your things first,' says Miss Desmond, who cannot bring herself to call them clothes, and is greatly afraid lest the maid may meet Carry.

'Of course. It won't take long. Now go back to your bed, and get warm. But kiss me first'—laughing—'to show there is no ill feeling.'

Miss Desmond enfolds her in a loving embrace, pushes her from her, cries 'Hurry!'—then pulls her back again. The eternal feminine has risen to the surface.

'Where did you get them?' asks she.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘When youth and beauty meet together,
There’s worke for breath.’

FOR quite two weeks Richard Amyot had been hearing from different sources that there was poaching going on in the rabbit-warren at Tudor Hall.

‘Nonsense,’ said he at first to his old factotum, who was his bodyguard, his gardener and his steward in one.

‘They do say it’s a fact, sir—and they two pore ladies all alone there. Shame to ’em! says I.’

The ‘two pore ladies’ might have resented this speech, but it was not meant for them.

‘But what have you heard?’

‘’Tain’t I who’ve ’eard—I’m short o’

hearin'; but Plowden's man he do say as there's firing in that wood from five o' the clock out.'

'Well, there's firing in most woods,' said Richie, who, however, was beginning to feel angry.

'Ah, ye'll have yer joke, sir. But it's gun-firing they speaks o'. And with the old lady there 'tis enough to frighten her out o' her life—the very sound o't.'

In spite of his jesting, Richie's blood took fire there. To frighten an old lady, that was bad enough for hanging; but to poach on the lonely, unprotected grounds of a poor old lady, ah! that would require hanging and quartering—only quartering first. Richie grew bloodthirsty; but he was determined to say nothing to Carry about this miscreant—this abominable poacher—lest she should tell Miss Desmond, and so give the dear old thing unnecessary anxiety, because, of course, it could soon be put an end to. He would see to it.

And he was as good as his word. Once,

indeed, in 'seeing to it,' he almost came upon the poacher, and, but for an untimely trip over a fallen root, would have caught him. But the rascal was fleet-footed, as rascals, of course, must be, and so he had lost his chance.

But chances are in abundance so long as the morning light lasts, and to-day it is lasting excellently as he trudges in secret fashion through the outlying woods that surround the warren. A pretty penny, no doubt, that fellow is making out of poor Miss Desmond's rabbits, while she—she is trying to make both ends meet, and to pay that dolorous debt besides. At this point Richie used to laugh a little. As if he could let her want for a paltry ten pounds! He has saved five already (alas, poor Richie! you have grown a little shabby of late), and the sale of that strawberry heifer next month——

'Sh! what is that?

A breaking of twigs, but very delicately . . . And now a dead silence. Richie stands still, crouching somewhat behind the

bracken. He glances over it—the rabbits' favourite feeding-place—and sees twenty-five or so of those small, nibbling things hop into the open. Then a shot . . . another. . . . And then two bunnies lie prone upon the ground.

‘A bad day's work for our poacher,’ says Richie, with a vicious smile. ‘I'd have done better in one shot.’

He is running, whilst he speaks, sideways through the tangle on his left, instead of straight across the warren as he did last time—and which he then recognised to be a mistake—and now, rounding a little, pauses a moment.

Yes; there, coming up the slope, the two rabbits on his arm, is the poacher. At once he knows him as the lad who had escaped him last time. Leisurely, as if a little tired, and yet with the spring of youth in his footsteps.

‘Well, I have you now, gun or no gun,’ says Richie, setting his teeth; he had not thought of bringing his own with him.

Making a slight *détour* that he knows

will bring him face to face with the poacher in two minutes, he goes forward. He has calculated to a nicety. Here is the open spot into which he is to advance and secure that daring young scoundrel, and now—now his footsteps can be heard—and now——

‘Hah, I have you at last!’ cries Amyot furiously, starting forward. Battle is in his eye, determination in the arm advanced. The arm has, indeed, almost clutched the poacher, when suddenly it drops as if paralyzed to its owner’s side. ‘Carry!’ says he.

Women, as a rule, bear small shocks better than men. Carry, finding that the earth will not open and swallow her up, thinks of the next best thing, and finding a dense mass of nice clean bracken near her, drops her gun (which providentially does not go off) and subsides into it without a second’s hesitation.

‘It is you, then,’ says Amyot, advancing ruthlessly towards her, in spite of her evident desire for seclusion.

‘Stay there—don’t come a yard nearer,’ cries Miss Desmond with authority, largely mingled with fear. ‘Stay there, Richie, I command you.’

‘You are ashamed of yourself,’ said Mr. Amyot sternly. ‘And no wonder. So it was you I chased the other day—you, posing as a poacher!’

Words fail to express his disgust. Carry, raging under it, grows defiant.

‘So it was,’ says she. ‘And it was *you* who threatened to put ounces of lead into me.’

‘Oh, that’s all very fine!’ says Richie, stammering a little, however. Good heavens! fancy his having even thought of taking a pot shot at Carry! ‘You—you laid yourself open to it, you know. It was your own fault.’

‘Oh, don’t let us have the old Eve story over again,’ says Miss Desmond, her voice contemptuous and strong still, even from the lowly position she has been obliged to assume.

‘Well, why did you run?’ asks Richie.

‘I suppose a person can run if she likes. I might as well ask you, Why did you run?’

‘To catch you.’

‘Me! are you sure it was me?’ Her tone now is malicious.

‘If not you, the poacher you pretended to be. Oh, of course, you think you have the best of the argument, and all that . . . and I don’t see how any fellow could state his case to you, whilst you are sitting there buried up in those ferns. But you know very well I never meant to fire at you, and that I came here only to protect your interests and Miss Desmond’s, and jolly sorry I am I ever took the trouble.’

He turns indignantly, as if to march off.

‘Richie! wait a moment.’

‘What for? If I thought you were going to explain——’

‘Well, I am,’ says Carry, though without meekness. ‘You are bound to hear about it sooner or later any way, from auntie, so I may as well have the first of the story.’

Then she gives him a little rapid sketch

of her doings (her misdoings, according to auntie), and the fact that already she has had as much money from Murphy as will enable her shortly to pay the remaining ten pounds of auntie's debt. The end of her tale leaves Richie filled with remorse and admiration.

'Why didn't you suggest this plan to me?' says he reproachfully. 'I could have come and shot them for you.'

'You, who are so hard-worked already? Oh no. . . . And, besides, I quite looked forward to the honour and glory of doing it all myself. And now'—sighing heavily—'now I find I have done very little beyond making you and auntie angry with me.'

'Angry! I angry! Not much,' says Richie emphatically. 'I think you are a regular heroine. But how on earth did you make the clothes? Stand up, and let us look at them.'

'Oh, I couldn't,' says she, getting a little deeper into the bracken, and evidently covered with confusion.

'Why not?'

His tone has now changed from the remorseful one to one of open curiosity.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

‘Do, any way,’ says he. ‘I want to see how you look.’

‘Oh, horrid, horrid!’ murmurs she, gathering her arms tightly round her knees, as if to hide them from him.

‘I don’t believe it, Carry. If you won’t get up of your own accord, I shall make you.’

With this he catches her from behind, and lifts her forcibly to her feet, she distinctly protesting, yet struggling with a desire for laughter all the time.

Then a little silence ensues. Carry, standing perforce before him, shrinking, blushing, uncertain, longing for the old, dear wishing-cap of her fairy-tales to come and hide her, is still intent upon the study of his face. What will he say—think? How will he take it?

He takes it with a roar of inextinguishable laughter.

Carry frowns and draws back.

‘What are you laughing at?’ demands she vehemently.

Amyot struggles with his mirth, which has now grown almost tearful.

‘At you,’ gurgles he. ‘Oh, Carry, if you could only see yourself and how funny you look!’

‘I’d rather look funny than like a fool,’ retorts Miss Desmond, with pardonable rudeness, considering all things. With this she turns and makes for home.

‘Where are you going? Carry, wait.’

‘What for?’ demands she in turn. ‘To be insulted again?’

‘Insulted! Nonsense!’ He has run after her, and caught her arm. ‘Who’s insulting you? Not I. Besides, I haven’t half admired your costume.’ He stops short, that old wild mirth possessing him again. ‘They are excellently cut,’ says he, his voice shaking. ‘The *tout ensemble*, indeed, is beyond reproach. You should cock the cap a little bit, Carry, and——’ He gives way altogether here. ‘Oh, Lor’! If Popkin could only see you now!’ says he.

‘Mr. Popkin is quite welcome to see me,’ says Carry, with extraordinary dignity—‘he or any other man! I should not be afraid of Mr. Popkin’s judgment. *He* has *some* common-sense, *some* intellect!’

‘Has he?’ says Richie, in the tone of one to whom a new and impossible view of things has been presented.

‘Oh, I knew how it would be with you,’ declares Carry with bitter denunciation; ‘what you would think, with your silly old notions. That’s why I sat down amongst those stupid things’—pointing to the unoffending bracken, which, indeed, looks rather the worse for wear—‘when I saw you coming. You are the rudest man I ever met in my life.’

‘Oh, I say!’

‘Yes, you are! There is no one on earth so rude as you are. No matter what you thought, you shouldn’t have said anything.’

‘But I didn’t say anything. Now what’—aggrievedly—‘did I say?’

‘Enough’—stiffly—‘in my opinion.’

She flings up her head, and prepares for a fresh departure.

‘You’re wrong—quite wrong,’ cries he. ‘Come back, Carry.’

‘Why should I?’ She turns to look at him, and there is withering question in her eye. ‘To be made a jest of again? To afford you more amusement? *You* may regard me as a merry-andrew if you like, but I——’

‘I don’t. It is not like that I regard you. Rather like a new——’ He hesitates as if struggling with his brain.

‘Woman’—sarcastically.

‘Not a bit of it. What’s the name’—impatiently—‘of that girl in Shakespeare who goes about in — er — *you* know! You remind me of her.’

Carry pauses. Does he mean it? Certainly there is a change in his tone.

‘I told you you were wrong,’ goes on Richie eagerly. ‘I declare honestly, I never saw you look so nice before.’

‘Then why’—only half mollified—‘did you laugh?’

‘That’s it. Can’t you see? The fool “who came to scoff remained to pray,” or praise, rather. I felt mad with you at first—I confess that—but now that I know all, and have seen you. . . . Look here, Carry, so far as I think, you ought never to dress any other way but that.’

‘You mean it? Really?’ Carry’s face is a picture of delight and content. Her flagrant, open pleasure at his flattery might be amusing, if it were not so very pretty.

‘I do indeed. And the little cap suits you, too. And so you are making money by the rabbits?’

‘I am, really. Of course it is slow work, but——’

‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll come and help you. Two guns will be better than one, and if I tell them *I’m* shooting your rabbits, it will put an end to all gossip.’ (One might have thought it would give rise to it.) ‘Will you be here to-morrow morning?’

‘At six sharp. It’s awfully good of

you, Richie, and I'll be looking out for you. And—and I don't feel anything like so uncomfortable about wearing these things now.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘And if you knew what jubilees
Begets, in sad souls, a friend’s glance,
You’d look up where my window is,
As if by chance!’

AT six *sharp* Mr. Amyot has been found in the woods of Tudor Hall during the past fortnight. To-day, even at half-past six, the light is a little uncertain, and so he and Carry find their shooting bad. So bad, indeed, that now they have decided on letting the bunnies go free for another twenty-four hours—a decision arrived at very cleverly, as the rabbits, on their first ineffectual shots, have retired into their dens, apparently for ever !

‘The season’s over, Richie,’ says Carry disconsolately, subsiding on a bank beside him.

‘Not *yet*. This is an exceptionally dark morning.’

‘No, it’s over. You mustn’t think I’m despondent. I’ve got more than enough now to make up auntie’s bill, but . . . And even if I can’t make any more money for her now, Richie, I can in the spring. The light will come back again then.’

‘In the spring! Oh, hang it all, that would not be fair sport,’ says Richie.

‘Not fair?’

‘To the rabbits. That’s their close season, you know.’

‘Oh, I see. I’—very penitently—‘quite forgot. The poor little ones, if their mothers were shot, would have to die of starvation.’

‘And so would your clients in town, later on.’

‘Die! My clients there! *Why?*’ says Carry, a little startled.

‘Can’t you see? It is really murder on a most tremendous scale. I shouldn’t go in for it, Carry, if I were you. If the

mother rabbits are killed by you, their babies die then, and you will be not only guilty of the deaths of those innocents, but of all the middle classes of England, as there will be no rabbits left to supply their daily needs.'

This extraordinary pleading goes to Carry's heart.

'I shall certainly not shoot rabbits when their little ones want them,' says she. 'And, any way, Richie, I think it is a cruel sport. Only that auntie might be made happy, I would not shoot them at all. Come, let's forget it; sit down here'—motioning him to a seat beside her—'and let us talk of something pleasant. How are you getting on with Aurora?'

'Do you call that pleasant?' asks Amyot with distinct indignation.

'Why not, Richie? You should not take it like that. *I* am your friend if anyone is, and besides——' The girl's soft, wide, frank smile (a little sad, perhaps) touches him. 'I can feel for you. If *you* don't want to marry Aurora, *I* don't want

to marry Mr. Popkin, and yet—I'm going to.'

'To marry him—that scarecrow?'

'Yes, isn't he like that?' says Carry, sighing. 'But what's the good'—mournfully—'of our calling him names? I've called him a *lot* of them myself, but they don't help me a bit. I'm sure I'll have to marry him, Richie, at last. You see, I may be able to save auntie *this* time, but next year—or the year after——'

'It's abominable,' says Richie angrily. 'Good heavens, to have to marry a thing like that! Why, his legs rattle in his trousers, and his chin is nowhere. Don't be a fool, Carry!'

'I know a fool as well as you do,' says Carry dejectedly, 'but, my goodness! what am I to do? Auntie's debt can be arranged this time—it might even be arranged again; but the lease of this place will be up next September, and then——' She stops as if suffocating. 'Then we must turn out, auntie and I, and—— What on earth is going to become of us?'

‘Still, if you wait, something might—surely *something* might happen.’

‘Wait! I’m not of the Micawber tribe,’ says she. ‘*Wait!* Why, I’ve waited now for ten long years, and nothing has happened to help us. No one has come forward to do us any good. No one has even gone so far as Mr. Popkin, who has asked me to marry him! After all’—with dismal gratitude—‘I suppose I ought to be thankful to him; small mercies are better than none; only—I’m not.’

Richie sits still, his face troubled.

‘Ten years! That’s nonsense, you know,’ says he. ‘You couldn’t have been waiting for anything when you were nine.’

‘*Couldn’t* I? Little you know about it! I’ve always been thinking of how to get rich. But I’m likely’—with a forlorn shake of her head—‘to wait for ever in this forsaken place. Riches are the only good; I’m going to insist on their putting that on all the new copy-books at the school below, but I’m afraid the

grammar is queer. Not that I care for money, Richie, really—only, if I had it, I'd love it.'

'Well, I don't see where you are now,' says Amyot, in an aggrieved tone. And, indeed, this very contradictory speech might have puzzled most people.

'I want to help auntie, for one thing—to get out of debt *for ever*, for another. It's quite plain,' says Carry. 'But it will never be, if I don't accept Mr. Popkin's handsome offer to provide for me and auntie for life. . . . I told him I *should* have auntie to live with me—with a view to choking him off, but it had the contrary effect. He seemed quite wild with delight at the idea of supporting auntie.'

'Perhaps he's made a mistake,' says Richie; 'has mixed up one Miss Desmond with the other, and in his heart loves auntie.'

Here they both give way to most irreverent laughter.

'Too good to be true,' says Carry

presently, her mirth subsiding before the awful possibilities of the future. 'Well, if I refuse him, I shall still wait for something better that may never come : and wait—and wait until—— After a while auntie says my charms will wane. Never mind the charms'—breaking into irrepressible mirth—'they exist only in auntie's imagination ; but—*isn't* she a dear ? So quaint, so charming !'

'I gave Miss Desmond credit for more sense,' puts in Richie, interrupting her a little rudely, it must be confessed.

'More sense ! Oh, Richie !' She casts a disdainful glance at him. 'She is full of it.'

'Not if she tells you such very *untrue* things.'

'I don't know. It's not so untrue, after all, Richie.' Carry, crossing her long and slender arms over her knees, looks into space. 'In four or five years more I shall be quite an old, *old* thing !'

'Even so,' says Richie—'though it's about the worst lie I've ever heard—you

would still be too good for Popkin ! So you might as well wait till then.'

'Ah, but *he* mightn't !'

'Rot !'—eloquently, if vulgarly—'I should think he *would*, and only too gladly.'

Carry laughs.

'Why don't you make that bargain with Aurora ?' says she. 'Perhaps she would wait, too.'

'I haven't made the first bargain yet,' says Richie gloomily. 'And I declare to you, Carry, when I do, I think the same hour will see me put a cartridge into my good old gun, and fire it into my brain.'

'Oh, Richie !'

'I shall excuse the fact to myself, at all events, by knowing that I must have gone mad !'

'You oughtn't to talk like that,' says she sharply.

'Why not !'

'It's wrong. It's wicked. I should be a great deal angrier with you, Richie, only you know you don't mean it.'

'Do you ? I don't,' says he moodily.

‘You aren’t an idiot, are you?’ says Carry angrily. ‘Why, look here, if you would rather die than marry her, why die? *Don’t* marry her! Even to be a cowboy, though that is awful, would be better than being dead. But at the same time, Richie, she is not so bad as you think. Why, you yourself, only a few weeks ago, said she was a “decent enough sort of a girl.”’

‘Did I?’

‘Yes, of course you did.’

‘I never saw anyone more anxious to see me made wretched than you are,’ says Richie reproachfully. ‘You’re worse than the Dowager.’

‘I’m not, Richie—I’m not indeed!’ exclaims Carry, cut to the heart by this speech. ‘And to prove it, Richie, if you really feel that all the money she has, and the restoration of the old place, could not compensate you . . . for—for other things . . . why, go away and *be* a cowboy—though that will make auntie and me very sorry.’

Her nice, kind, earnest eyes are wet.

‘You mustn’t be sorry,’ says Richie. ‘Even if I went there—to California—I’d be sure to come back to you after a bit—perhaps with my pile made: who knows?’

Carry shakes her head. She evidently doesn’t believe in cowboys.

‘Well, I needn’t be a cowboy, if it comes to that. I——’ He pauses. ‘I—I could enlist, you know, if that would suit you better.’

‘Enlist?’

‘Yes. It is such a comfort to talk to you, Carry; one can discuss things with you, and I’ve never had a mother or a sister, or even a cousin. But you are just like a sister . . .’ He moves nearer to her, and tucks his arm comfortably round her neck. ‘I’m sure, whether I’m a cowboy or a soldier, I don’t know what I shall do without you.’

‘I’m glad you feel like that,’ says Carry, slipping her arm round his waist, ‘because it’s just how I feel to you. *I’ve* never had

a brother, and you—you just fill the place.'

'It's a splendid thing to have someone that one is really fond of to speak to,' says Richie, sighing, and drawing her nearer to him (there isn't much occasion!).

'And who is fond of one,' supplements she.

'Ah! that's half the battle. And when one knows people ever since one was born——'

'Oh, you're wrong there,' says she, loosening her arm *slightly* round him. 'You were born long before I was.' The woman has asserted itself, even in the boyish Carry.

Amyot laughs.

'Five years,' says he—'*nothing* nowadays. Would you make me out a Methuselah? Well'—going back to his subject—'what would you have me be?'

'Not a cowboy, any way,' says she. 'You spoke of enlisting.'

'Yes. I expect it will come to that.'

'Lucky you! I wish *I* could!'

‘Well, so you can—now!’ He gives a swift but eloquent glance at her present ‘get up.’ ‘As you *are*, you’d make a first-class young Volunteer; and even in the Regulars there would be no one to touch you in your regiment, I’d lay a bet!’

‘I suppose you think you’re funny,’ says Carry, rising with excessive dignity—a dignity that would have been perfect if only those beastly things had come down a bit lower. But they were born so! ‘*I* don’t! And, any way, I’m going home now.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ says Richie.

‘Certainly not!’—stiffly. ‘It would put auntie out very much.’

‘Nonsense, Carry! As if I am not always with you!’

‘It isn’t *that*’—frowning—‘but in these clothes——’

‘She is bound to know that I know, sooner or later.’

‘Better later; and, any way, she has not ordered breakfast for you.’

‘Nonsense again! Breakfast for two is

breakfast for three; and, though you are so dreadfully inhospitable, I know Miss Desmond will give me something to eat. Besides, I'm starving, and it's a long way back to my place.'

'Well, come,' says Carry.

She laughs, and the ice is broken. The ice is always brittle with Carry.

CHAPTER XXXV.

‘ Oh, tell me less, or tell me more.’

‘ Do you remember,’ says he presently, ‘ something I said to you before the bazaar? We were out fishing, I think, and I asked you what you were going to wear at Cecil’s stall. I don’t know what you said, but I recollect quite well saying that a rational costume of some sort would suit you down to the ground.’

‘ Yes, I remember. But you did not mean anything; you couldn’t ’—going back in her mind to that remote hour—‘ have meant anything.’

‘ No—a stray shot only. However, it was a good one.’

‘ What *did* you mean by it?’

She is a little sore still.

‘What I mean now—that it is awfully becoming to you.’

Carry laughs in spite of herself. Compliments to her are always a superior kind of joke—nothing more.

‘I’ll have to leave it off very soon,’ says she; ‘there is no light in the early mornings now. To-day, only that you were there, I should have gone home at once.’

‘Why not try the evenings? Best time of all for rabbits.’

‘I couldn’t,’ says she, shrinking a little. ‘People might be about then; and, besides, there is very little light in the evenings, either.’

‘Well, that’s true.’

‘Anyhow, I have made the ten pounds,’ says she, with a sudden touch of eager delight, ‘and auntie is released from her present fears, whatever the future may bring.’

They have come in view of the house by this time, and on the doorstep a small and dainty figure may be seen standing,

her hand to her brow, scanning the landscape o'er.

‘That’s auntie! My goodness! why has she got up at this hour?’ says Carry, stopping short. ‘She *hates* to see me in these clothes, and to see me with *you*, Richie—that would mean perdition! *You* must go that way’—pointing to the yard—‘*I* this way. Like Philip of Macedon and somebody else, we shall probably “meet anon.”’

She runs quickly through the laurels on her left, that effectually hide her from the anxious figure on the hall doorsteps, and, making a little turn, afterwards reaches the library windows, and, scrambling through one of them, glides up the old staircase, going softly, lest a rustle should betray her, and so reaches her room in safety.

A rustle, indeed, might have betrayed her! She knows this as, with a step as swift and nimble as a cat, and a hysterical desire for laughter, she goes upstairs and disappears round its ancient curves almost

before a looker-on could imagine she had been there.

Certainly auntie had been on the look-out for her. Auntie has been *uncertain* about her morning sleeps ever since she first found Carry had gone in for shooting. But to-day of all days, what on earth had waked her? Very awkward, too, because perhaps, if she (Carry) had been seen with Richie, auntie might have blamed Richie in a way, and said little unkind things to him—that is, if auntie *could* be unkind to anyone.

In her room now, Carry tears off the objectionable garments, dives into the orthodox respectable ones, and, after a glance at herself in the cracked old glass, runs downstairs again.

The hall door is wide open; the light is rushing into the old hall, and a breeze with it. The breeze is a little cold, a little raw—a forerunner of the wrath to come, when winter will be full upon us.

Yet, in spite of this chill, this sudden rising of the wind, old Miss Desmond,

who has the courage of her race, stands motionless, looking always down to that point where the rabbit-warren lies.

Suddenly two small but capable hands are laid upon her shoulders.

‘Auntie!’

Miss Desmond turns with a little cry.

‘Oh, my darling girl, you have come home at last! Oh, Carry, I can’t bear this shooting business! *Where* have you been?’

‘Why out,’ says Carry.

‘Rabbiting?’

‘I am afraid I can’t say that, I shot so few—fewer’—brightening—‘than I shot yesterday. *Ten* brace, then! How’s that for a silly young maid?’

‘Oh, I think maids should not shoot at all,’ says Miss Desmond reproachfully.

‘Then other maids could not live,’ says Carry. ‘But, auntie darling, what are you doing here at this hour? Why aren’t you in your cosy bed, eh?’

‘Why aren’t *you*?’ asks Miss Desmond sadly. ‘Carry’—the old lady’s tone grows tragical—‘don’t try to deceive me. You

can't like murdering those poor little creatures down there ; yet you are doing it, to save me from dishonour. Oh, my darling, I know all ! Do you think I can sleep when I know you are out there, destroying your youth and your beauty in a desire to help me ? Oh no, Carry ! Last night I went to sleep, but my sleep was troubled, and all at once I felt you were not in the house, and——'

'You must not have any more such feelings,' says Carry, drawing her into the dining-room—'no, not another ! For one thing, the season is over for me, because I can't shoot in the dark ; and, besides, I've made the ten pounds you and I want ; and for the rest, I find I'm not a born murderess—at least, not until I *must* be one again !'

She pauses. Her voice has broken.

'Carry, Carry !' says her aunt, catching her in her arms.

'Oh, it's done—it's done now !' says Carry, bursting into a passion of tears. 'But I can't kill them again. No'—vehemently—'*never*. Their eyes, their

poor little kicking legs——’ She pulls herself together by a gigantic effort. ‘You’re shivering, auntie—so am I. These sunny mornings are a fraud; and, besides—I met Richie just now coming home, you know’—with a sob—‘and he said he hoped you would give him some breakfast.’

‘Richie!’

‘Yes—and he told me he was awfully hungry. What is there?’

‘Eggs,’ says Miss Desmond tragically.

‘That will do,’—thoughtfully—‘with a little bacon. And I think I’ll light a fire in the dining-room, auntie. I—I think he is out there somewhere, and if he feels as like a frog as *I* do, he will be glad to see a fire somewhere.’

She looks out of the window.

‘Ah! there he is——’

‘Is he?’

Old Miss Desmond looks out, too. And there he is, beyond doubt. She throws up the window.

‘Come in, Richie. Come in, my dear. Why do you stay there?’

‘I’m coming,’ cries Richie heartily ; and in another moment he is within the hospitable if barren house. And, indeed, it is Richie in the long-run who lights the fire, and helps Carry to cook the admirable dish of ham and eggs that presently comes upstairs.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

‘Fragile beginnings of a mighty end!’

So Carry made the ten pounds that sets poor old Miss Desmond’s heart at rest—for a time; and so the world goes by Hillesden, so swiftly, so monotonously, that it is with a rush of wonder that one wakes to know that winter is over, and ‘spring has come up this way’ once more.

Only the bare beginnings of that loveliest of all seasons—a mere baby of a thing, very delicate, but full of sweet life, for all that, and with a great promise in it of better things to come.

Already in hedgelands, and such wild enchanting ways as hide the violet and the ‘rath primrose,’ tokens can be met with, every day, of their coming; although as

yet February has only dawned, and fires are lit in all the rooms, and one goes about shivering, wrapped up in silks and furs. But time, though it has carried us thus far, has failed to show the right or the wrong of Miss Royce's going. It has, indeed, told nothing at all about her.

This chilly February has brought Sidney Fenton to The Towers again straight from Dublin, where he has been quartered for the past five months. It has brought Mr. Browne there also, why he hardly knows himself, as his invitations for that month if put together would make him a complete—if scarcely decent—suit of clothes; and, really, to go to the same house twice in a year argues the coming of old age! Still, a distinct friendship for Anthony Verschoyle, that almost reaches the word affection, has swayed his decision. He is very desirous of Anthony's happiness, and two or three things during his late visit showed him where that happiness lay. But there seemed to him to be a little hitch, a little uncertainty about it, and—well, he told

himself, it was curiosity alone made him accept Anthony's second invitation to The Towers.

So the spring has brought him, too, to Hillesden; and more than that! It has brought Jinnie to a state of overflowing energy very difficult to combat. Even Miss Royce's successor, an excellent person of uncertain—or, rather, very certain—age, with admirable testimonials, and a wart on her nose, is unable to control her. Jinnie, who has never ceased to regret Miss Royce—whose supervision, indeed, had been ever of the lightest, and who had let her go her own way, in the kindest fashion, so long as it did not interfere with hers—naturally detests the 'new woman,' and gives her, it must be confessed, an uncommonly bad time.

Besides the guests I have named for The Towers, there are a good many others expected there. Amongst them, Sir Reginald Baring, the distinguished painter, and Lady Audrey Osborne, a pale, haughty old maid, of even *more* certain age than Jinnie's

governess, and a cousin of Verschoyle's ; she was in the act of being painted by Sir Reginald in town, and anxious that nothing should prevent the world—*her* world—from seeing her angular attractions in Burlington House next season, had written to Anthony to give her house-room whilst Baring was with him.

Who has the pluck to refuse an unmarried woman anything ? I have heard of married women being rather unhandsomely treated ; but, after all, that discovery carried its excuse with it—there was a man to her back. But the spinster ! Anthony, who did not want to entertain Lady Audley, although she was his cousin, wrote her a most cheerful answer, giving her to understand he would be charmed to receive her, and having posted the letter, felt like a hypocrite for three hours.

Having told this deliberate lie, and on paper, too, and knowing that Sir Reginald is coming, Sir Anthony goes down to his mother's ; where, being her day, a considerable number of people have assembled,

Mrs. Berkeley and the Langley-Binkses amongst others.

‘Baring is really coming this time,’ he tells his mother; ‘you know he disappointed me before, the time of the bazaar, on account of influenza, but he can be depended upon now. Good heavens !’—his voice breaks off and he frowns slightly—‘how far off that bazaar seems !’ He stops, frowning still, but in a thoughtful way.

Mrs. Verschoyle, who is near Lady Maria, after a hurried glance at him, tells herself there is pain in his thoughts.

‘When are you coming to spend a “long and happy day with me in the country”’—quoting idly—‘to meet him, mother ? He is an old friend of yours ?’

‘And a delightful one,’ says Lady Maria, ‘though I’m afraid I’m too old to amuse him now, whatever I might have been twenty years ago. Shall we say from Saturday to Monday, then ?’

‘From Saturday to Monday week, rather ! Baring has come to study children

in their first stage, and as he is himself a little overdone, he had better do it here with the fresh air and that.'

'Decidedly better. Have you provided a child?'

Jinnie, who has been sitting on her grandmother's knee, here steps off it.

'*I'm* a child,' says she, with enormous dignity, and in her sharpest treble; 'I'd like to be painted—but not too *much*! Not like Mrs. Berk——'

Here several people fall upon her bodily, and choke off the awful termination of her sentence. *Who* is painted too much? All refrain from giving even an *eye* answer to the question—that is, as much as possible! Here and there, it seems, it isn't possible. The flesh is weak!

'Dicky Brown will be with us, too,' says Verschoyle, breaking into the dreadful pause; 'also Anstruther, and others. You *must* come, mother. How can we get on without you?' He turns suddenly to Cecil—'We can't get on without you, either; you will promise to make up

our house party. I can depend upon you ?’

‘You can indeed,’ says Cecil, laughing. ‘I know your house parties of old.’ With the sweetest smile she turns to him: ‘I think I should have gone to you, even if you had not asked me.’

Anthony gives her a strange, sad, questioning glance for answer, then turns to his mother.

‘Saturday next, then? And with an indefinite end to your visit?’

Lady Maria laughs and shakes her head at him.

Yes; she will go to him, but only for the time specified. And she will depend upon him to bring all his guests down to dine with her on Wednesday. She would like to do something for his guests even in a *little* way, and especially for Sir Reginald. As for Lady Audrey—well, she seemed a kind creature, if a little——

Lady Maria, as usual, has her own way, and to-night there is a dinner at the Dower-house, given specially, as she said,

for Sir Reginald Baring. Jinnie, I regret to say, has been given a promise that she shall come down to dessert. This was at Lady Maria's urgent request, a request given in to only too readily by Jinnie's mother—who had been interviewed by Jinnie five minutes before—and who is as bad as the child's grandmother in the way of denying her dead husband's child nothing. Jinnie of late has been permitted to come down to dessert every night—'small nights,' she calls them—but to come down to a 'big night!' this fills Jinnie's soul with glee.

Besides, she will meet Sir Reginald, with whom, contrary to all expectations, she has become quite a boon companion.

He has been painting, during the past days, a little naked baby of two years, belonging to one of Anthony's tenants; and Jinnie, a charmed spectator, has been permitted to sit quietly in a corner during the proceedings. She has made herself even useful—Jinnie *useful*!—by keeping the baby in humour!

Lady Maria had been not only enchanted, but almost insufferably proud, at Jinnie's success in this art! She had kept the baby good all to-day, when even its own *mother* had failed.

'Oh, that child is full of promise,' said Lady Maria to Sir Reginald, when he told her of Jinnie's prowess in the painting field of his studio. And indeed she is!

* * * * *

No wonder, then, that Jinnie is looking forward to this 'dessert' with Sir Reginald, who has praised her high and low since his arrival.

It is not time for her to come down yet, however, and in the meantime conversation is flowing freely.

Mrs. Berkeley, as usual, is talking at the top of her extraordinary falsetto. She is sitting on Mr. Browne's right, but on her left is an elderly gentleman of huge dimensions, generally and specially in that part that Mr. Browne very rudely alludes to as his 'tummy.' Her Infantry boy having deserted her for younger and fairer

charms, she has now dedicated herself to the more mature, the less beautiful, but decidedly the richer, Mr. Shine. He is an Anglo-Indian, fifty or thereabouts, and fabulously rich, say some people.

‘Dreadful dull, the country.’ She is talking to Mr. Browne *for* Mr. Shine (a little trick some people have), with her best Society air—the air that verges on boredom. ‘Specially in this part down har.’ (She means ‘here.’) ‘They really don’t seem to know what day of the week it is, or the hour! Never saw people so dead-alive. Give something to shake ’em up a bit.’

‘How would you begin, for example?’ asks Mr. Browne anxiously. His tone suggests the idea that he is athirst for knowledge. The portly Mr. Shine, who is on her other hand, has been apparently struck dumb by her powers of conversation, mingled with immense admiration of her personal attractions. So Dicky perforce comes to the rescue. Mr. Shine has fixed his oyster eyes on her, and is

listening eagerly, a little appreciative smile on his lips. He is, in fact, like Mr. Carroll's sun — '*Shining* with all his might.' (The pun is Mr. Browne's; pray forgive it.)

'Oh! . . . Ah! . . . *Well*,' says Mrs. Berkeley, whose witty impromptu in answer to this question has not yet been evolved, 'least said, soonest mended, you know, and to wake up these aborigines—*you* understand, of course'—sweetly—'that I am alluding to no one here to-night—would take a bigger mind than mine.'

'*Could* there be a bigger?' says Mr. Browne, throwing a world of admiration into his treacherous eye; 'still, I think I know someone who . . . and as like turns to like, you know, you had better let me introduce you to' (this in a low tone)——

'Not a woman, I *hope*,' says Mrs. Berkeley, checking him.

'Not much!' Mr. Browne's face is dark with indignation. 'Fancy my intro-

ducing a woman to anyone! Horrid lot, aren't they?'

'Go away! you're a bad boy!' says Mrs. Berkeley, with the affectionate smile she reserves for men alone: whereon Dicky, seeing he cannot well obey her at this moment, the dinner being only half through, and taking his dismissal at its worth, goes on valiantly, if plaintively.

'I'll go, all too soon,' says he. 'But in spite of your cruelty——'

'Mine? Am I ever cruel? And who is it you wish to make known to me?'

'Why,' glancing across her expressively, 'your next-door neighbour. The poor man has been casting murderous glances at me for the past five minutes. I'm young to die. Let me live yet a little while.'

'Stupid!' says Mrs. Berkeley, shrugging her meagre shoulders. 'He'—softly, so that the next-door neighbour may not hear—'was made known to me an hour ago.'

'An hour ago?' questions Dicky, as if

hardly believing his ears. He had, however, heard the introduction.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘She is a woman of genius. She knew that two great minds once met . . . It will be an everlasting grief to me, but I resign you! May he make you even *half* as happy as *I* should have done.’

‘Hypocrite!’ says Mrs. Berkeley, with her most juvenile smile.

‘Oh, it’s all very well to go on like that now,’ says Dicky reproachfully. ‘Mr. Shine’—leaning a little forward and catching the Anglo-Indian’s eyes—‘what are your views on bimetallism, and the decrease of the rupee? Mrs. Berkeley’—‘Dicky!’ furiously in an undertone from Mrs. Berkeley—‘is quite an authority on *both* subjects.’

‘My dear Mrs. Berkeley, is this so?’ says Mr. Shine, waking up brilliantly. ‘Now look here, as I see it’ . . . and so on.

‘If he’ll only marry her and take her away to far Hindustan, what a happy

family the Hillesden folk may still be,' says Mr. Browne to himself, as he turns aside to make himself agreeable to the prettiest girl at the table. Hitherto Mrs. Berkeley has frustrated his desires in this direction, so he has taken safe and quick means to get rid of her.

And, indeed, if he only knew it, he has done the lively widow a good turn. Mrs. Berkeley, for once in her life, has 'struck ile'—as Mr. Gilead P. Beck would say. The Anglo-Indian, being permitted to have all the talk to himself — Mrs. Berkeley having nothing to say on the rupee, and being hopelessly ignorant on the subject of bimetallism—gets up from dinner later on, believing himself the most eloquent, and her the most intelligent creature in the world.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

‘The brave, ’tis true, do never shun the light ;
Just are their thoughts and open are their
tempers,
Freely without disguise they love or hate ;
Still are they found in the fair face of the day,
And Heaven and men are judges of their actions.’

CONVERSATION at the other end of the table is going briskly—perhaps a little too briskly.

Jinnie has just arrived in a very simple frock of white muslin, and a sash of innocent azure, and with, too, a brain terribly wide awake considering the hour. So far, however, beyond a distinct refusal to sit next Lady Audrey, and an even *more* distinct determination to sit in Sir Reginald’s pocket, no open breach of the peace has occurred. Even when Lady

Audrey addresses her as 'my good child' (which really has *no* meaning), Jinnie creates no public disturbance, and nobly refrains from assault and battery, though evidently it goes hard with her.

'I *do* hope, dear Sir Reginald, you are not over-exerting yourself whilst down here,' says Lady Audrey presently. She gives him one of her maiden smiles. 'People like you, so hard-worked, should do *nothing* when in the country. It is only we—useless butterflies of the world—who should do anything there; for you it should mean perfect repose.'

'*Dear little Butterfly,*' whispers Dicky Browne to his pretty girl, who gives him an answering glance, but cleverly refrains from a smile. Lady Audrey's eye is on her. The Butterfly disapproves of pretty girls. Sir Reginald has made it apparent, since his coming, that he admires *this* one.

'Even *I* am quite ashamed of taking up some of your time that should be given to rest alone,' she simpers. 'Still, I am an

excellent sitter, am I not? Like a bit of marble!’

‘It is quite a pleasure, I assure you,’ murmurs Sir Reginald.

‘Oh, that is *too* kind!’—with a languishing air. ‘But I hear that this morning you were painting someone in the studio. *Is* that wise, when you have come down here expressly for your health?’

‘He is incorrigible,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle, laughing; ‘we can’t restrain him. He has begun a study that promises to be really wonderful.’

‘Yes?’—eagerly. ‘Of whom?’

Lady Audrey bends towards her. For the first time it occurs to Mrs. Verschoyle that Lady Audrey has designs on the unfortunate Sir Reginald.

‘Ah!’—mischievously—‘you should not ask me so *publicly*. The fact is’—lowering her voice—‘it was a little woman, charming and young—oh, yes! very young.’

Lady Audrey stiffens.

‘Nothing from the nude, I hope,’ says

she in a sepulchral tone. Elderly unmarried ladies are often a little indecent.

‘Well, I’m afraid——’

Pause.

‘Sir Reginald, Lady Audrey is anxious to know if your study of this morning was——draped.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ says the genial painter. He has caught the twinkle in Mrs. Verschoyle’s eye.

‘I had no idea,’ says Lady Audrey, almost closing her spinster lids, ‘that Anthony would permit such—such extraordinary proceedings (to say the *least* of them) in his house.’

‘But she was so charming,’ says Sir Reginald. ‘Every limb so rounded—every smile so sweet. It was a delight to paint her, and——’

‘No more, *please!*’ says Lady Audrey, with an indignant sniff.

‘And she was only two years old,’ continues Sir Reginald, finishing his sentence ruthlessly. ‘Such a dear little naked child. By-the-by’—suavely—‘can you

give me a sitting at twelve to-morrow? A little early, but——'

'A most reasonable hour,' says Lady Audrey.

Her tone is still a little starchy—the word 'naked' has offended her—but everyone feels the episode is at an end. Everyone, however, is wrong.

'Are you goin' to paint *her*?' asks Jinnie in a tone she firmly believes to be a whisper, but which reverberates through the room. As though her voice is not enough, she makes vigorous use of the valuable first finger, directing it at Lady Audrey.

'I hope so,' says Sir Reginald smoothly. 'But people as a rule, you know, Jinnie, do not point, or make personal observations out loud. And, besides——'

He has done his best, poor man; but it would take a Napoleon to frown down Jinnie.

'What! Her, and not *me*? That ol——'

A severe pinch from Mr. Browne, who

has got up under pretence of getting some grapes, delivered at the critical moment, puts an end luckily to the unfinished word.

Providentially, too, Lady Audrey has been carried away by Mrs. Verschoyle into a dissertation on the requirements of the poor, and thus a terrible catastrophe has been averted.

Sir Reginald, however, is greatly annoyed; and Jinnie, after another fresh sally, finding him for the first time cold to her witticisms, turns her dark, curious eyes full upon him. There is a little fear in these usually defiant orbs.

‘What have I done?’ demands she, in a wonderfully subdued tone for the dauntless Jinnie. There is even a suspicion of tears in it. She is devoted to Baring, and this queer coldness of his, that she does not at all understand, reduces her to the last extremity.

‘You have been rude,’ says Baring in a low tone.

‘Well, I don’t care’ — rebelliously.
‘You’ve been cross to me. You are look-

ing *horrid* at me. And you are unkind, too '—as if all the foregoing were nothing to this. 'You are the unkindest pig I ever met. You are painting that nasty little baby of Mrs. Jones's, without a bit of clothes on her—not so much'—here Jinnie grows choked with sobs that threaten to be loud and deep—'not so much as her shimmy! And you've never painted *me* like that.' Sensation at table. 'Though I don't *care!*'—passionately. 'I'd *hate* to be painted like that. I want my pinky frock on me, an' my sash. I——' Miss Verschoyle rises, and, standing well back, regards Sir Reginald with a crushing air. 'I'll *never* love you again! You're a beast, you are! You're painting that nasty wobbly baby, an' now *her*.'

Again the terrible forefinger defines the situation.

'Yes, my dear,' says Lady Audrey, addressing the irate Jinnie with what she honestly believes to be a fascinating, but what in reality is a most forbidding smile. 'Sir Reginald has most kindly consented'

—Jinnie begins to think of the local concerts—‘to make my poor face a masterpiece. You surely don’t object to that, little girl!’

‘Was he painting you this morning?’ asks Jinnie, her queer eyes searching Lady Audrey’s.

‘Certainly. We must say “yes” to that, Sir Reginald, eh? This very morning’—archly.

‘In the studio?’

Lady Audrey nods.

‘In the studio, I think, Sir Reginald?’—with an engaging smile.

‘The same place where he painted Mrs. Jones’s baby?’

‘The very same’—with quite a touch of hilarity.

‘Had you your clothes on?’

Frightful silence!

Lady Audrey has sunk back upon her chair with evidently a threatening of hysterics. Mrs. Berkeley is choking behind her fan, and Mr. Browne, who ought to have known better, is, I regret

to say, apparently in the last stage of apoplexy. Fans up to this have not been permitted to men, and thus handicapped, Mr. Browne has perforce to decline behind his napkin.

Lady Maria, with a glance at Mrs. Berkeley, rises promptly. It is a *little* too soon, but the situation must be saved—and *such* a situation !

The women all rustle away to the drawing-room, and Jinnie, thank Heaven ! goes to bed.

* * * * *

‘ You will come over to-morrow and take luncheon with me ? ’ says Lady Maria to Cecil, just at her departure.

‘ Thank you, yes, ’ returns Cecil brightly.

Involuntarily her glance goes towards the corner of the hall where Anthony and Fenton are standing. Anthony interrupts her glance.

‘ Won’t you ask us, too, mother ? ’

‘ My dear, of *course*. You and Sidney and Dicky. ’ She laughs her pleasant old

laugh. 'The more the merrier. Men are scarce always in these small places, and always welcome.'

'Shall I be welcome?'

Fenton has crossed the hall to Cecil's side. He throws a great deal of meaning into his question.

'You?' says she, smiling; and then, trying to control the little touch of feeling that is agitating her: 'Yes. Do come!'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

‘ After all, the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth, for all beauty is truth.’

OUT here on the terrace, so balmy is the air that one can scarcely believe summer has not arrived once more in mad haste. But ‘ February, fair maid,’ only is with us—a maid still young, as maids should be, and very frivolous ! The air is almost warm, and from the parterres beneath the breath of the coming flowers is ascending delicately, nervously. Not the breath of such unfriendly blossoms as ‘ The snow-drop cold, that trembles not to kisses of the bee !’ but violets and sweet alyssum, and a few early anemones, dainty if gaudy ; whilst all round and everywhere are the splendid daffodils, those fair and haughty

damsels 'that take the winds of March with beauty.'

Cecil, leaning over the iron railings of the terrace, and noting the beauty of the glorious day—the thrill in all things growing—is conscious of a strange sense of delight—of joy. She feels uplifted and happy—too happy for mental analysis of her mood. It would have troubled her to ask her whether the charm of the day, or only of the minute, has thus exhilarated her; making her feel that wings are superfluous things to certain mortals, and that she at any moment, without accessories of any kind, could soar 'twixt earth and heaven—with heaven in reach, if she so wills it.

She glances towards her heaven.

'You thought I would not come back,' says Fenton in answer to that glance, and *à propos* of something just said by her. 'Did you really believe I could keep away?'

His tone is low and very soft—and distinctly reproachful. To be reproached by

her lover always touches a woman : and Cecil specially would be open to sentiment of this kind, her nature being generous in the extreme. All through luncheon, Fenton, who had returned to Hillesden for this special purpose, had paid assiduous, if very careful, courtship to her ; so careful, indeed, that Anthony alone of all men there had noticed it ; and with the knowledge, as it came to him, came not grief only, but despair.

‘ I don’t know that I thought at all,’ says she, slow but uncontrollable tears gathering in her eyes.

‘ Does that mean, Cecil, that you don’t care ?’

‘ I don’t think you ought to say that.’

She has recovered herself again, and, glancing at her, he, whose judgment has never been at fault before, is uncertain now as to whether she loves him sufficiently to throw in her comfortable lot with his impecunious one ; a doubt, but a slight one.

‘ Perhaps not.’

He leans over the railings and looks to-

wards where the last gleams of the sun are now clinging to the hills, as though beseeching them to keep dread night away.

‘There are many things I say that no one cares for,’ murmurs he sadly. He does the sadness perfectly. ‘But you! I *did* believe in you.’

‘You may’—softly—‘believe still.’

She draws her breath quickly as she says this, and now that it *is* said, she makes a movement as if to go, but her hand is lying on the railings, and Fenton, with a quick gesture, lays his own upon it. Thus capturing it, he waits—holding it closely—and expecting every moment an indignant removal of the slender fingers within his, but, after a first gentle repulse, the fingers lie calmly in his own.

So, then, the victory is his. Now to propose, and then . . . Yes, he will speak. Her hand is still in his. Yet . . . Something holds him back, checks him. To the day of his death he never knows what it is, but that he *does* hold back is true. He hesitates, and that instant’s hesitation

changes the current of more lives than one.

He is still holding her hand, but now she softly removes it—not sharply, not distrustfully, but with a gentle determination. As she does it she smiles at him. There is a great friendliness in her glance, with a certain shyness that makes her beautiful face even more beautiful; but this the man beside her fails to see.

The withdrawal of her hand, however, warms him to his work. He must secure her now or never—now, before she hears anything. *That other* is uncertain! From day to day troubles may be expected from her. But with Cecil once secured—why, Cecil's money may keep 'that other' silent.

He turns to Cecil, the very words of his proposal on his lips, when she stays him. There is a pretty light in her lovely eyes, and a sweet pity on her lips.

'Sidney.' That clasp of his hand on hers has made him one with her, she believes in him so truly. 'Sidney, do you

remember last summer ?' She is feeling very confidential with him now, and very happy. Oh ! he would never have taken her hand like that and held it if he didn't love her ! 'How beautiful it was, and yet——' Her face grows a little sad. Then, 'I often think of it—of *her*.' The last two words are breathed so low, he does not hear them.

'And I too,' returns Fenton tenderly, thinking she is alluding to his visit at that time to The Towers.

'I am sure of it. You always seemed to me,' glancing at him straightly, 'so good at heart. That,' a little shyly again, 'is why I have made such a friend of you. Do you know I, too, Sidney, never cease to think of . . . that poor little girl.'

Fenton turns aside, and, looking over the railings, throws a pebble into the midst of a blooming bunch of 'butter and eggs.'

'I wonder what became of her?' continues Cecil, laying her own arms upon the railing.

'I wonder !' says he.

He had been on the point of proposing to her, as has been said. Any thought that way lies dead and buried now—for the present.

‘You have heard nothing?’ says Cecil sadly. ‘She liked you, I think—at least, I often fancied she did.’

‘She has not written to you, then, or told you anything?’ He laughs as he asks this—a laugh very imperfect. ‘She has told me nothing.’

‘What a sad, silent little creature! I often hope, Sidney, I may meet her somewhere and help her.’

‘A delusive hope.’

His face is still turned away, but his voice is as natural as ever.

‘Oh no; one life drops into another very often. I am quite sure I shall see Miss Royce again. Not here, of course, but——’

“‘In that station of life into which it has pleased—the *devil*—to call her,’” quotes Fenton, looking at Cecil with eyes as clear as day, and a light laugh. Who

the devil was that had pleased to call Miss Royce into her present state of life, he refrains from saying.

‘Cecil, come in and have some tea,’ says Mrs. Verschoyle, coming suddenly to the window. And Cecil, with a little sigh, turns and goes indoors, Fenton at her elbow.

They are not the only fresh entries. Cecil has barely had time to take her cup in her hands when Jinnie rushes tumultuously into the room.

‘Jinnie, darling, what dreadful manners!’ says Jinnie’s mother. She has said it so often that one wonders why she is not ashamed of saying it again. She opens her arms, however, and the child springs into them.

‘I’ve seen Miss Royce!’ cries she.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

And thou wert aye a masker bold :
What strange disguise hast now put on ?

‘MISS ROYCE !’ says Lady Maria, holding out her pretty hands apprehensively. ‘Impossible, darling !’

‘Yes, I did,’ a little indignantly; ‘down by the river.’

‘Miss Royce !’ says Verschoyle. He turns to his sister-in-law. ‘*Could* she have come back ?’

Fenton, who had been standing very close to one of the windows, now turns leisurely and gazes out of it, his back to the room.

‘No, no ; impossible—as your mother says.’

‘It is *not*,’ says Jinnie hotly. ‘I saw

her quite plain! She had a new frock on her, and her face was white. An' I called to her. I screamed out my *biggest*' (this is saying a good deal, as all her listeners allow), 'but she didn't hear me. She ran away, back by the bank and into the wood.'

'And you?' asks her mother.

'I wanted to run after her, but Miss Sterling wouldn't let me. I *hate* Miss Sterling—she's a pig!'

'Jinnie, my *dear*!'

'Well'—cheerfully—'she *is*, anyway. I wish she would go away. An' I wish Miss Royce was coming back again. Maybe'—hopefully—'she is.'

'Go and take off your things, darling,' says her mother, who at heart is a little disturbed. Why on earth should that wayward girl have come back here again? Is she in want? Oh, surely not. Poor girl! Had they been too harsh to her?

'I will in a minute,' says Jinnie, 'but I haven't said "how-d'ye-do" yet.'

Anything to make a delay. Jinnie, who

as a rule has to be bribed to be polite, now goes round the room, making the most courteous greetings to everyone, except to Fenton. Coming to him she pauses, and having made a careful survey of his features, puts both her thin little hands behind her back.

‘Why do you look so cross?’ asks she.

‘*Cross!*’ Fenton recovers himself instantly. ‘And to *you*, Jinnie? Colney Hatch will get you yet if you don’t be more careful.’

‘Well, you *were*,’ says Jinnie, a little puzzled by his change of countenance. ‘What were you thinking of?’

‘Of the dreadful fact that I must leave *you* to-morrow.’

He laughs, and catching her by her tiny elbows, lifts her high into the air. It is quite true that he is going. Verschoyle and all of them are aware of it. He has some leave still remaining to him, but he has arranged to spend it elsewhere. He has been, however, a little vague about his movements. Anthony was aware that

he was in difficulties of some sort—money difficulties principally, and there was a suggestion of his sending in his papers. Verschoyle had offered to help him, but Fenton had laughed it off. Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof; and he might be able to hang on still for a bit—and if not——

He was always vague.

‘You’ll come soon again?’ says Jinnie, who is very fond of him. Cecil, who is near her, draws her on her knee.

‘Almost immediately!’ returns he gaily.

He gives a swift glance at Miss Fairfax as he says this. She is indeed his last card, and, in spite of his present difficulties, when he came here he determined to play it—with small hope of success, however, until this evening, and even now he is not *quite* sure. Nevertheless, with ruin hanging over him, he is still light-hearted and débonnaire.

‘By-the-by, Anthony, I think I ought to say good-bye to the Langley-Binkses and a few others this afternoon. They’ve been

very civil to me. It would be only decent, eh ?'

'I am sure they would appreciate it,' says Anthony with a smile. 'If you go through the upper meadow you will reach the Langley-Binkses' place in half the time.'

There is extreme cordiality in his air. It is impossible to restrain the longing to get Fenton away from Cecil as quickly as possible.

'Your charm increases with your years,' says Mrs. Verschoyle as he bids her good-bye. She smiles, but her tone is very cold. That old strange distrust of him is alive again. Why is he in such hot haste to go ? And to say good-bye to the Langley-Binkses, of all people, who as a rule have been nothing to him, save butts for his idle sarcasms. And he, of all people, to put himself out to please—to propitiate a living soul ! 'Such courtesy as yours is delightful nowadays,' says she.

'You say too much,' returns he, pressing her hand affectionately—he is quite equal

to most occasions—‘but if I have *your* appreciation——’

He says good-bye to Lady Maria and to the others, and finally to Cecil.

Miss Fairfax is standing now a little drawn back from the rest, and partially hidden by a curtain; but ‘lovers’ eyes are sharp to see,’ and Verschoyle, with a sense of maddening misery, is certain of the fact that Cecil’s hand lies clasped in Fenton’s for quite half a minute—that a light has grown within her eyes that never shone for him—and that, as finally Fenton leaves her, the girl’s eyes follow him to the door.

Sweet and honest eyes, it is well they can follow him no farther !

* * * * *

Fenton’s feet do not go towards the old meadow that will lead so quickly to the home of the Langley-Binkses; on the contrary, they go quite in the contrary direction.

He, indeed, ‘gathers up his loins,’ as the Scriptures say, and runs swiftly, by

hidden ways, to that old trysting-place of his and Maden's—the ash-grove.

Knowledge of the other sex has brought him to this spot. Women—those sentimental fools—are sure, like murderers, to come back to the scene of their . . . folly.

But he does not find Maden here. For all that—after glancing round to assure himself, not that she, but that no troublesome third is present—he goes to a little chestnut-tree now half bursting into leaf, and, stooping, lifts a plain white stone beneath it.

It had often before been a silent post-office for Maden and for him. Now again it fulfils its duty. A little note lies beneath it :

‘I am here. I have followed you. I know your intention. But as long as life is in me, it shall never be fulfilled. I must, I *will* see you. Meet me to-night at Ingham.’

Fenton's frown is a little ugly as he

reads this. What a nuisance it all is! But, by Jove, what a spirit she has! Through his depression and rage a sort of sullen admiration for her stirs him.

It does not stay him from his determination, however. This thing *must* be put a stop to, now, at once, and for ever! If she insists on seeing him to-night at Ingham—so be it. It would no doubt be dangerous *not* to see her. But when he does, he will declare to her fully his intention of marrying Cecil Fairfax—if fate so far helps as to make that desirable heiress accept him.

Of course she will *not*! It would be just his luck all over, to be refused by her; and, indeed, so uncertain is his belief in Cecil's love for him—an uncertainty heightened by the fact that he has no smallest affection for her, and is not in touch with her on any point, and does not in the least understand her—that he decides on writing to her from The Towers before his departure, and proposing to her, giving—very recklessly—his address at

Ingham. If she accepts him, he will be able to explain away any unpleasant gossip later on, should it arise, about Maden's having been there, too, at that particular time—Maden he had always felt could be nasty—but, and he laughs again involuntarily, Cecil will refuse him. Well, he shall so word his letter that, if it is to be a refusal, she need not write ; if an acceptance . . . what the deuce of a bore life is likely to be !

In the meantime . . . Maden.

Well, he must buy her off. His thoughts grow puzzled here. Has he the money, in his now somewhat impecunious condition, to buy anyone off? And, more, had he the world's wealth, could he buy *her* off? She—he pales a little . . . remembering . . . Is she one to count and balance money against love? He feels himself all at once between the devil and the deep sea. *How* on earth is he to get out of this embroglio?

Any way, he will clench the matter to-night. To-night! no later. He will

write his letter of proposal to Cecil, the answer to be sent to Ingham, and there, with Maden present, will fight the battle out to the bitter end. The last penny he has shall be Maden's if she consents to part without a row; and even after the parting——

He stops here. *After* the parting will come his marriage with Cecil, and any money he *then* will have . . . no, it does not bear looking into.

Troubled as he is, he still remembers to pay that visit to the Langley-Binkses, who are immensely delighted with it, and afterwards goes back to The Towers, with barely two hours left to pack his clothes, to make necessary explanations to Anthony, and catch the six train to Ingham.

END OF VOL. II.

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